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How LittleBigPlanet will transform gaming on PS3

IS THIS THE FINAL LAP?

The state of racers – by the people making them

SILICON ON CELLULOID

The next generation of videogame flicks

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In search of fortune and glory with Lego Indiana Jones

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Back in the summer of 2004, a game developer contacted **Edge** and asked if we wanted to see a new project, one that couldn't be easily explained over the telephone. You have to see it to appreciate it, we were assured. Of course we wanted to see it, so the following week we welcomed two representatives of the game's publishing team to our offices. It was obvious that they were excited about what they were about to show, but it was excitement that seemed laced with nervousness, perhaps because this was the first time the game would be seen by anyone from the press. They proceeded to fire up the prototype software on a debug console – and our stupid man-child faces took on adoring smiles that remained glued in place for the next 30 minutes.

The game was *Lego Star Wars*. It was, admittedly, an early version, lacking some of the finished package's pizazz, but even in this form everyone agreed that it was going to be huge. Not that the game's makers seemed entirely convinced. "Why aren't you making a GameCube version?" we asked. "Mmm," they said, "do you think we should be making a GameCube version?" "Yes," we said politely. They went away and didn't bother. The game launched on PS2 and Xbox, and sales went supernova. Then they made a GameCube version. Now, four years on, the *Lego Star Wars* series, on various platforms, has sold 12 million units.

There aren't too many things in the gaming world that look like sure-fire hits right from the outset, but *Lego Star Wars* was one. On page 46 you can read about how its creators are seeking to follow it up with another, almost equally universally beloved Lucasfilm property (and decide for yourself if its lead character looks quite as fetching in-game as he does on this issue's particularly tactile cover).

On the topic of movies, be sure to take a good look at the rundown of celluloid treatments of game properties slated to make appearances at a multiplex near you soon in this issue's look at Hollywood's ongoing love affair with the medium (see p74). If game-makers can take Lego-ised versions of movie characters and make it all work, surely at least *one* of these prospects is going to fly. But which one? Let us know what you think.

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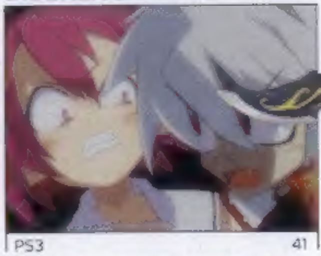
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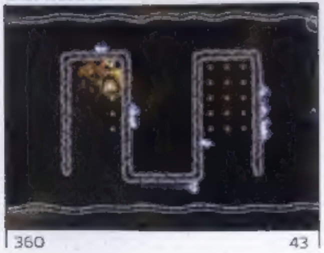
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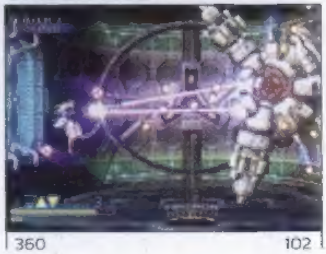
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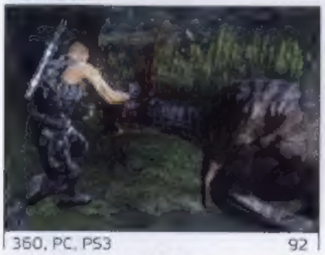

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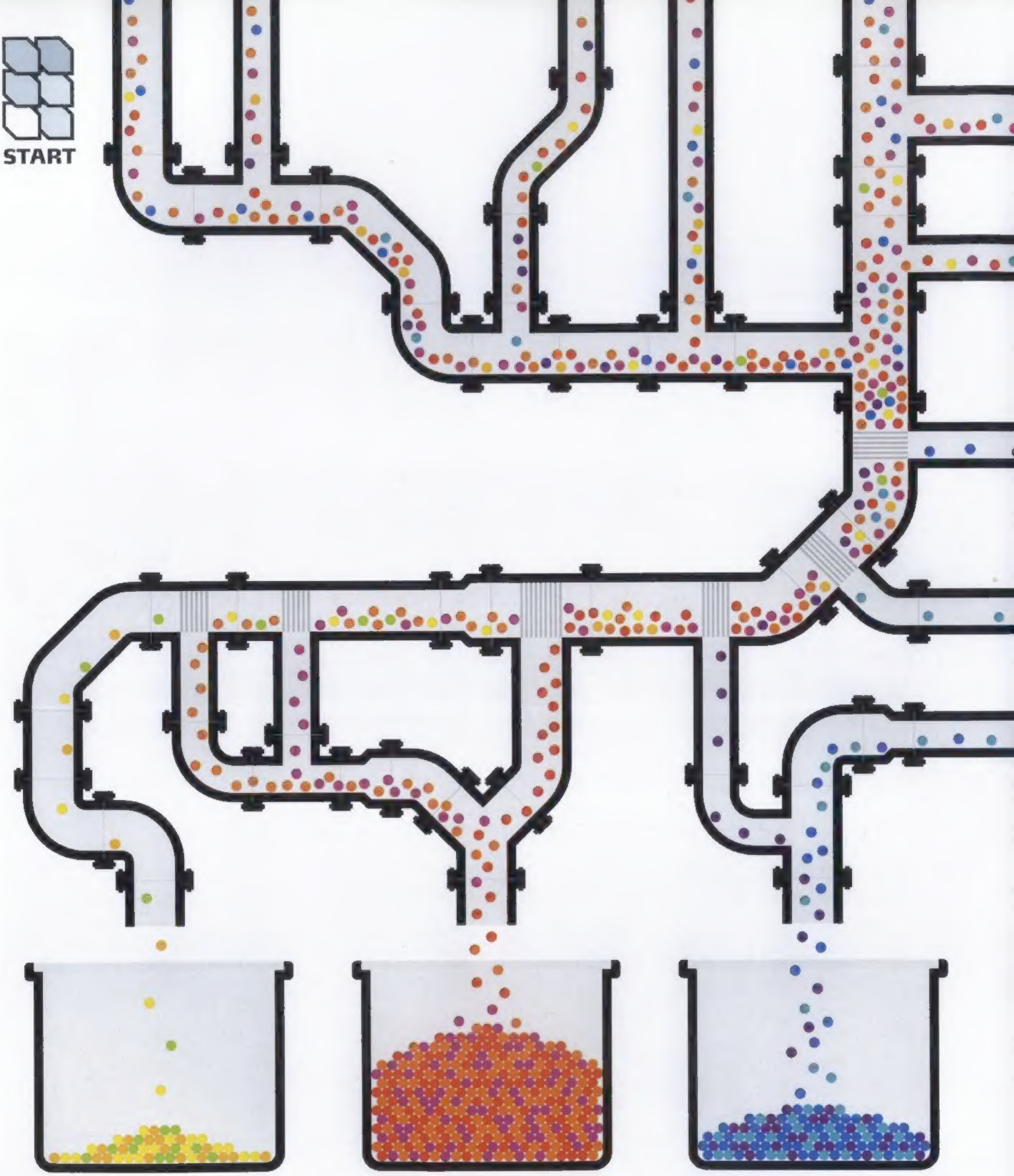

START

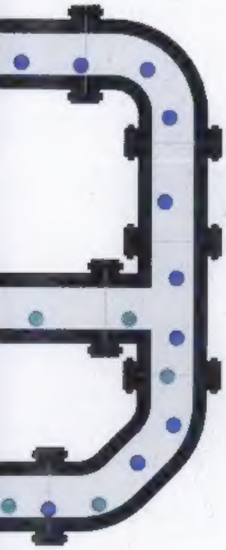
SOFTWARE

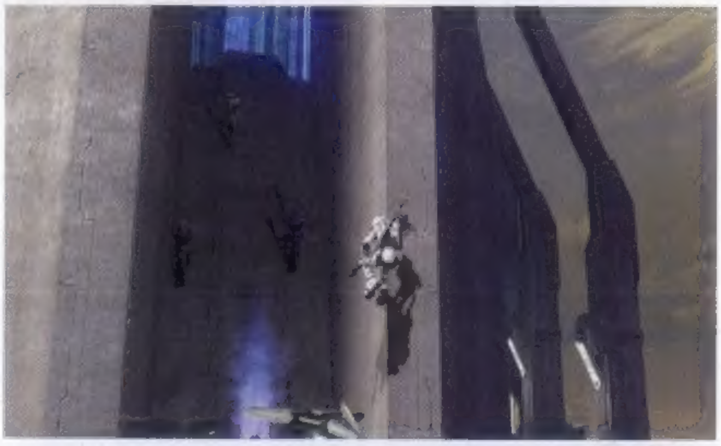
Mods for the masses

User-generated content has finally begun to hit consoles – and the real challenge isn't getting people to create, but in helping them consume

"Quite honestly, we're not really happy with the way it's working out." *Halo 3*'s Forge is causing Bungie headaches. According to community lead **Brian Jarrad**, it has simply proven too popular, far exceeding the predictions Bungie made for it during its rapid gestation.

Popularity would seem like a nice problem to have, but Bungie's situation nonetheless highlights a major issue for user-generated content that is shared by many of its pioneers: unlocking player creativity is one thing, developers are discovering, but it's the means by which that creativity is then displayed, dispersed and consumed that represents the bigger challenge. And, as Jarrad complains, the massive quantity of content being made in Forge has made clear the inefficiencies of the infrastructure built around it.



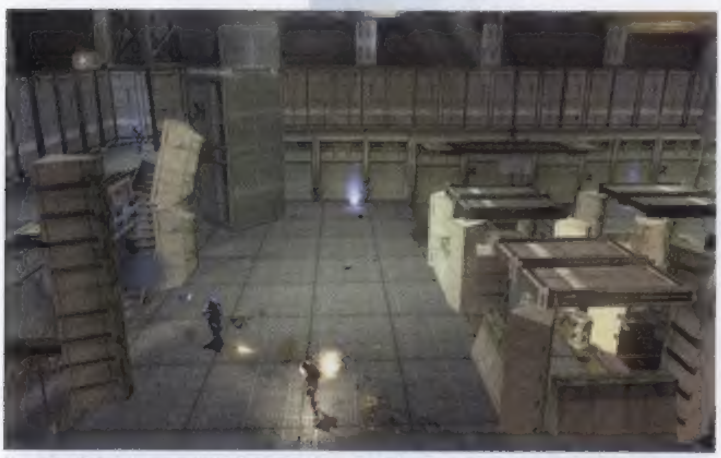


Forge has inspired gamers to use existing levels in unconventional ways – Pillar of Death by Gravedigger5454 coverts *Halo 3*'s Epitaph level into a messy battle to blast each other off a ledge with the gravity hammer

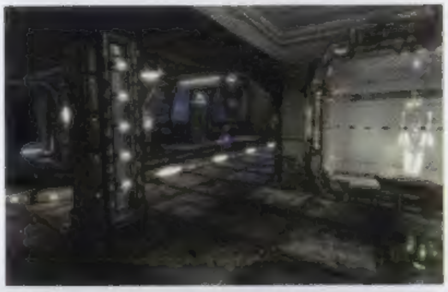
"The way it's happening in reality isn't the same as we thought it would on paper when we set out to discuss it a year ago," says Jarrad. "We wanted to make it really easy to share. Anyone who's played a custom game has that custom map and gametype stored locally on their Xbox in a recent games list – so you can save it permanently. We wanted these creations to spread virally, and step in with what we call Bungie Favorites, our attempt to weed through all the files that are out there, to make the best of these very visible to the mass market. But we've found that the sheer volume is overwhelming, and it's literally impossible to sift through it. I've made my own Forge maps, published them to the website and within a minute they've gone off the first page."

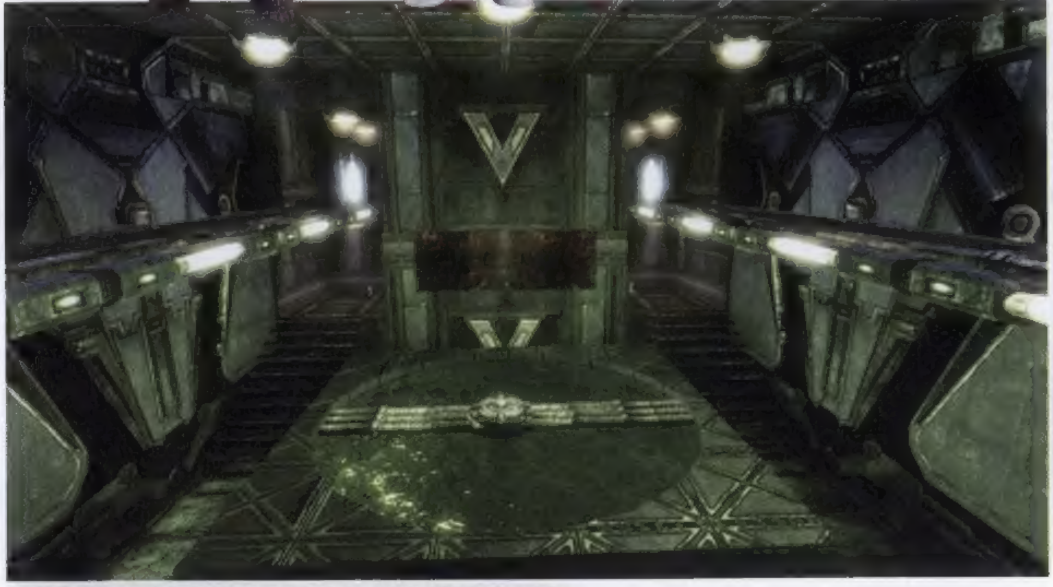
"A lot of people don't know that Bungie Favorites is part of *Halo 3*; that's making us think hard about how information is presented to make sure people know these features exist"

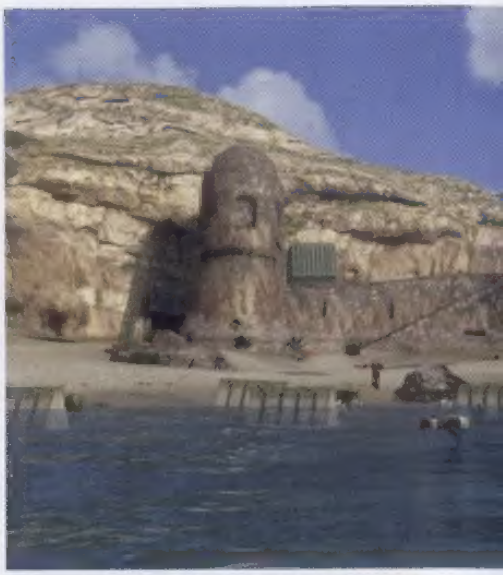
The issue is not just the volume, however, as Jarrad goes on to explain, but the ergonomics of the entire process of user-evaluation: "A lot of people don't know that Bungie Favorites is part of *Halo 3*; that's making us think hard about discoverability; how information is presented to make sure people know these features exist. In retrospect, we could have built these aspects into the game itself. Right now, we're relying on people to go to the website, find a cool file, download it to their box, play it, and then come back to the website and post some sort of informed review. That isn't happening – the number of people giving actual ratings is a small percentage. It'd be great if in the game you had an immediate way of giving feedback; maybe we'll start to look at using volume of downloads statistics, embedding metadata into the files so we can use small, robust searching mechanics. To be honest, our web team and engineers really didn't know how popular this was going to be, and now we're trying to play catch-up."

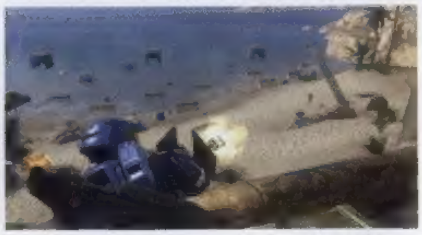


Many levels built on the base of the highly modifiable Foundry level are attempts to recreate maps from previous *Halo* games – above is a version of *Halo 2*'s Foundation constructed out of prefabricated blocks by Shock Theta

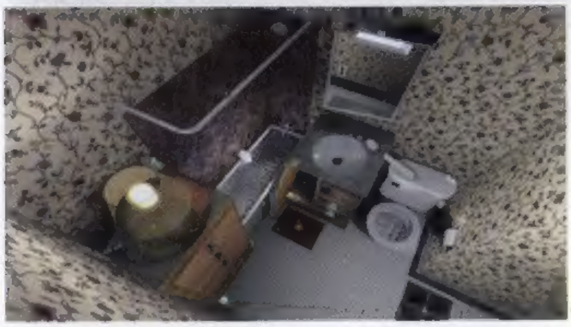








Storm the Beach, by Trickmyster, is a Bungie Favorite, turning Last Resort into the D-Day landings; the attacking team must make it across the sand under heavy fire from the wall. Another Forge manipulation of the same level turns it into a race course



A map which features an oversized toilet has been a feature of every *Unreal* game so far, and MustaphaMond has brought the famed level to PS3. A more serious effort is featured above that in the form of DM Conveyor by Bret Hart, cooked to PS3 *UT3* by AnubanUT2

Bungie isn't the only developer that has discovered the power of user-generated content and then struggled to find the optimum way to exploit it. Sony's entire virtual community project, referred to by senior executive Phil Harrison as spearheading Game 3.0, relies on its ability to connect users with each other's creations in a way that is as fluid and accessible as possible. *LittleBigPlanet*, of course, is the title at the forefront of the movement (more of which on p32) and its method for aggregating and rating user content will almost certainly make or break the game. More than a little aware of this fact, the game's developer, Media Molecule, has some canny ideas for integrating the promotion of content with the creative process itself.

"Say that I create a really cool object," explains *LittleBigPlanet*'s producer, **Pete Smith**. "What I can do is have that as a prize in my level if certain winning criteria are met. You play my level and win that object, and can now go into your own levels and use it in whatever way you want. Someone then comes into your level and notices it and says: 'That's a cool object, can I have it?' But you can't give them it because you don't own the objects, you just won a copy of it – so you then direct them to my level, perhaps through the object's signature itself, because that's the only way they can get it for themselves. Suddenly, I'm getting a lot of people coming to my level so my reputation as a creator is getting good because people are looking specifically for me and for other levels I've done."

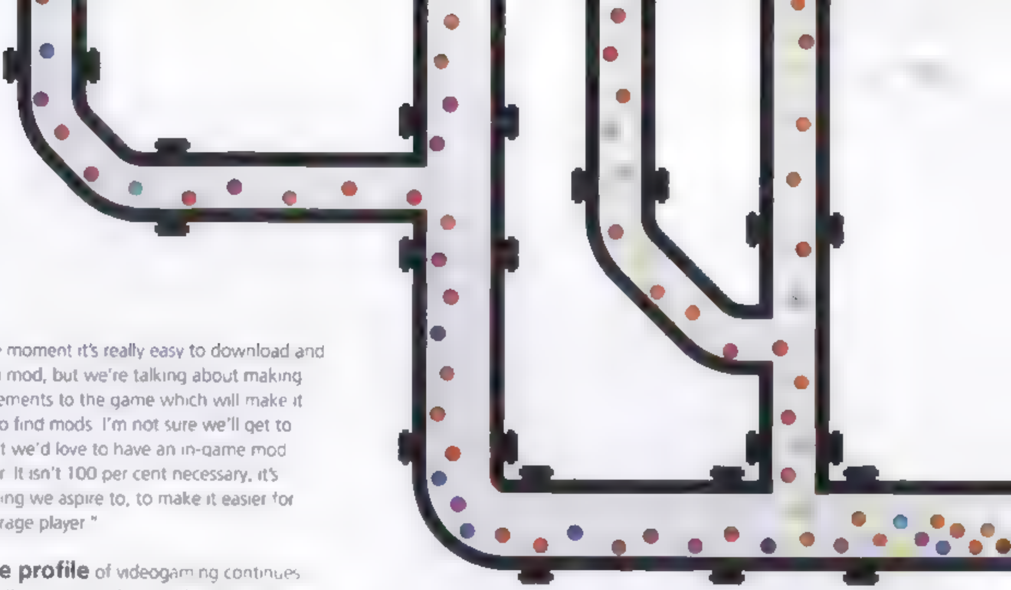
By itself, the idea that you can effectively hyperlink other people's content from within your own custom-built level promises to be a hugely successful grassroots method of recommending and connecting content together.

"We anticipate that some people will just have a level pointing you to other good levels," says Smith. "That 'hub' will become highly rated itself because it's recommending good levels."

Another collaborator with Sony's vision, Epic Games, is in a good position to appreciate how far apart the world of consoles and PCs are in terms of what is considered accessible by their respective audiences.

"If *Halo 3* is a cruise ship, then Forge allows you to rearrange the chairs on the deck of the boat," says Epic's vice president, **Mark Rein**. "What you can do in *Unreal Tournament 3* is design a new boat. It doesn't even need to be boat! We pretty much open up everything to mod makers. The only thing we don't give them is the source code and the engine."

The upshot of this comparative power and complexity is not only that the majority of people won't be involved in content creation itself, but that the means of production are necessarily PC-based, distanced from their potential consumers on the console. It's not hard to see how that material might have a hard time penetrating the console's playerbase without relentless promotion, particularly when Jarrad says that the vast majority of people playing *Halo 3* have never even tried to upload or download any screenshots, videos or Forge maps. Rein, however, is unfazed, pointing out that *UT3*'s community presence on the internet already does much of the necessary work.



"There are some really good aggregator sites – there's a blog called UT3mod.com listing the best mods that have been cooked in the PS3 format. We're also counting on magazines like you guys to talk about mods when they come out," says Rein. "But we are going to do more ourselves. I think over the next year and a half we're going to do a really good job of bringing these things into the light so people will hear about them. We're going to have another big nVidia Make Something Unreal contest and aggregate all the best mods there and let people vote on them. Hopefully we'll get some of the better mods on PlayStation Network – the most obvious place for PS3 owners to look."

"Sony are the pioneers in this area. They're opening up the trails, not just for our game, but in other games, too. This is definitely a differentiating feature for them"

Bungie, too, has found that *Halo 3*'s internet community has propped up its own imperfect system, with Jarrad singling out Forgehub.com as one of the more successful groups cataloguing, archiving and linking user content. Jarrad does not see this as a good result – and, despite Rein's nonchalance, he too hints that more comprehensive solutions are in the pipeline.

"At the moment it's really easy to download and install a mod, but we're talking about making improvements to the game which will make it easier to find mods. I'm not sure we'll get to this, but we'd love to have an in-game mod browser. It isn't 100 per cent necessary, it's something we aspire to, to make it easier for the average player."

As the profile of videogaming continues to soar, that average player is changing. Even the traditional retreat of the hardcore, the PC, is seeing increasing numbers of casual gamers – and for many of these gamers, user-generated remains undiscovered. The strategies employed to engage this new audience are similar to the solutions employed in the console world – programs like the mod jukebox Crosus, a united user content aggregator, installer and community tool that may well draw casual gamers who would otherwise be alienated by the prospect of installing a mod or map. "The primary problem with amateur content is that the install procedure isn't organised well," says Crosus's chief designer **Vincent van Geel**. "Installing a mod is often a tricky thing and can easily ruin your vanilla copy of the game, not to mention pollute your computer with shortcuts, registry files and so on. Crosus does all the work for you. You can simply click download and play and it keeps your computer clean. Hopefully this will help modders and other indie developers get their content to a much larger, potentially interested market that otherwise wouldn't bother."

As well as allowing Crosus users to leave their own comments, deals are being made to collect ratings and reviews from other websites, making much of Crosus's allure dependent on its unfettered connectivity with the internet. It's a factor to which Sony has paid attention, opening up PlayStation Network to the web. The policy extends beyond the crucial community aspect of user-generated content. However, none of Epic's plans for bringing *UT3* mods to the PS3 would have been possible without Sony's backing, and Rein is keen to stress how important the console's openness is to user-generated content.

Friendlyman's Icey level pushes *UT3*'s art style in more abstract directions, creating a web of rain-slick gantries and precipitous drops which makes splash-damage the key to victory

"I think even we were a little sceptical that they were going to let us go on the internet and allow people to bring in their own content," says Rein. "But they told us, yes, they want to do that, and that user-created content is really important to the future of videogames in general. They stuck to their guns and they've been fantastic to work with. Sony are the pioneers in this area. They're opening up the trails, not just for our game, but in other games, too. This is definitely a differentiating feature for them. People want games that bring them entirely new experiences over time. It's great for us and them. We'd say to Microsoft, look at what we're doing on the PS3. It's been extremely well received, it's helping people's impression of the game and of the platform, user-generated content keeps people playing the game and would keep people subscribing to Xbox Live. They haven't said no, but they haven't said yes yet either. We'll see. I'm cautiously optimistic."

Charles Peterson

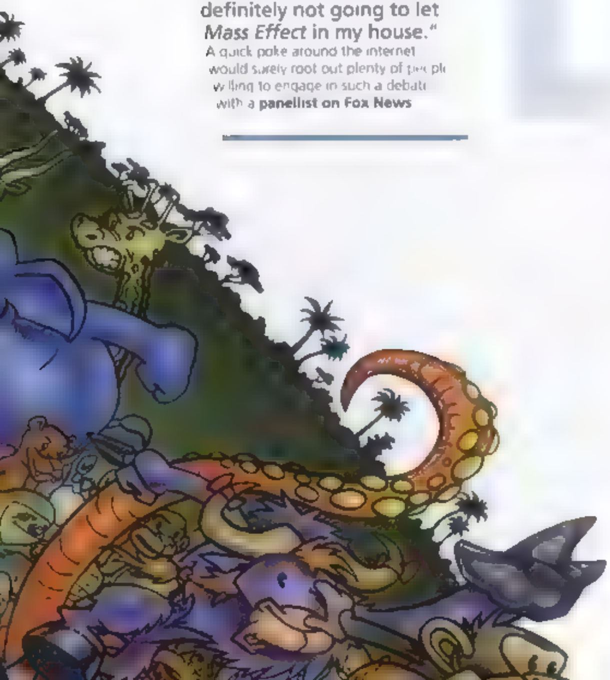
Left to right: Bungie's community lead Brian Jarrad, *LittleBigPlanet*'s producer Pete Smith, and Epic's vice president Mark Rein. Rein says of user-generated content: "It's about more than just maintaining a playerbase – it grows the base, extends the longevity of the product"

"It's a disaster. It's a disaster. One or two may succeed, and I hope this is one of them, but the structure of a game is completely unlike the structure of a film… If you see one or two (that profit) that will be good. It's dumb. It's stupid. But then who ever said the film industry was being controlled by smart people?"
John Rhys-Davies laments Hollywood's infatuation with film adaptations of games (while picking up his pay cheque from In The Name Of The King)

"Then there's a lifestyle element: there's fewer green spaces and kids are sat home playing computer games on the TV when in the past they'd have been burning off energy outside."
Food doesn't get kids fat, videogames do, says chief executive of McDonald's UK, **Steve Easterbrook**

"These are Satan's Sudoku, crack cocaine of the brain. Even the crappiest cartoon or lamest soap teaches a child about character, plot, drama, humour, life. Playing videogames, children are mentally imprisoned, wired into their evil creators' brains."
Janice Turner reveals in her Times column that Nintendo may still have more work to do before it converts everyone to the cause

"Who can argue, possibly, that Luke Skywalker meets Debbie Does Dallas is a good thing? It's not. And I'm definitely not going to let *Mass Effect* in my house."
A quick poke around the internet would surely root out plenty of people willing to engage in such a debate with a **panellist on Fox News**



PUBLISHING

Playing chicken

A year since its brassy launch into publishing, it's now time for Gamecock to disappear

Some of the more unusual headlines over the last 12 months in gaming have been focused on the antics of **Mike Wilson** (pictured on top, above) and his band of merry pranksters at fledgling publisher Gamecock. The company marked the end of E3 with a jazz-inflected funeral march through Venice Beach, hijacked Ken Levine's acceptance speech at the Spike Video Game Awards, and, most recently, Wilson took part in a war of blog posts with John Romero, Wilson being the brash young Ion Storm marketing man who convinced Romero to approve the infamous 1997 'John Romero's About To Make You His Bitch' advert for *Daikatana*.

"Yeah…" Wilson says sheepishly about the spat. He's been on an extensive and self-confessedly booze-filled trip around Europe and Russia, meeting developers and distributors on the eve of establishing Gamecock's European studio, and hasn't yet heard that the latest in the saga is that Romero has claimed Wilson has made a full apology. "I actually did, but just for the bit about his kids. I felt badly about that last paragraph," Wilson says. "Can I retract it?" No, says a grinning colleague. "It's over," shrugs Wilson. "Yeah."

"You don't have a favourite music label, you have a favourite band. If you love a game, or hate it, we want you to know who made it"

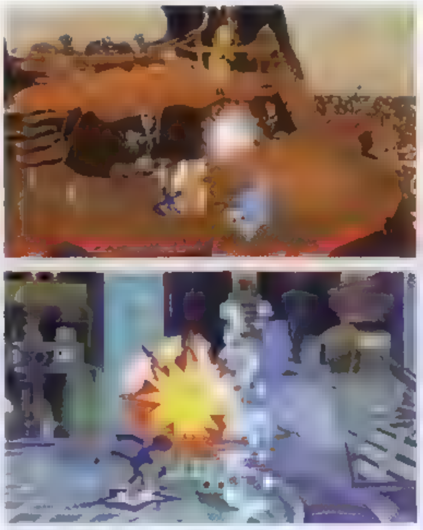
He's also had to apologise over the Levine incident ("Yeah… That one didn't go so well"). But now, with Gamecock's first games released, the well-received DS horror adventure *Dementium: The Ward* and the decidedly badly received MMO FPS *Fury*, Wilson says that it's time to observe the principles on which the publisher is based: to put the developer first, an ethic he had first experimented with via Gathering Of Developers. The plan: developers retain their IP and do much of the marketing and PR themselves, while netting larger return percentages.

Gamecock is therefore meant to be invisible, despite its visibility during 2007. "Well, we didn't have any games!" explains Wilson. "What are you gonna do? It's a while since Gathering, so we felt it was necessary to reintroduce the ideas. And suddenly everything's so buttoned down – everybody's showing PowerPoints to each other – so we needed to say that we weren't going to come back underfunded or being too serious."

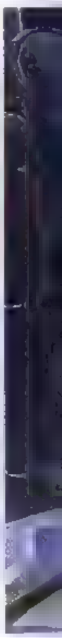
Being invisible has been something of a challenge, however, with Nintendo requiring all publishing licensees to have their logo on the front cover of games, and not the developer's. "In the music industry, you don't have a favourite label, you have a favourite band. If you love a game, or hate it, we want you to know who made it," explains Wilson. "We were concerned about all this because Gathering never did any console stuff, and we're not super-important to Nintendo. The other console guys allow us to put the developer on the cover, but we're required by law to include Gamecock. We'd prefer to be on the back in fine print."

Establishing a European office was a stage that Gathering never reached because Take-Two was its co-publisher in the region, a situation that Wilson and partner Harry Miller have been careful to avoid this time around. The first European releases, in April, will be *Dementium* (an adapted version that fixes save issues that were criticised in the US release), *Hail To The Chimp* and *Insecticide*.

The European office, which will be in or near London, will have just four staff members,

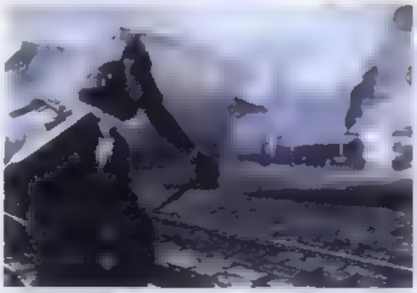


Hail To The Chimp, developed by *Stubbs The Zombie* creator Wideload, is due in June for PS3 and 360. With its tagline of 'The Presidential Party Game' and a satirical premise that has players fighting to be the president of the animal kingdom, complete with post-match parodies of TV political news coverage, it certainly fits with the image Gamecock has carved for itself



maintaining the leanness of Gamecock's Austin-based US business. "Just because we're small it doesn't mean we'll not be getting out there," Wilson warns, explaining that they will sell games to any distributor in the world that wants them. "Everything goes everywhere to make a buck. We've got ten games in production, and we keep it like that. It's one person per game on the publisher's side. It's about press dealing directly with the developers and fans forming relationships with them." However, for developers who would rather get on with creating their games, Gamecock will take on the responsibility instead.

Early next month sees Gamecock hosting the gaming conference EIEIO 2008 in Austin, an expo Wilson sees as "the perfect transition point to no longer be talking about Gamecock, but about these games." Held alongside the vibrant South By Southwest digital, cinematic and music arts festival, Wilson hopes that EIEIO will form the kernel of a new gaming segment, a strong possibility given the number of developers in the area. Either way, it [illegible] demonstrate whether the games can maintain the same high profile that Gamecock has managed to build over the past 12 months.



Sabotage, developed by Hamburg-based Replay Studios, is due in September and is a stealth action game based on the real-life exploits of French Resistance operative Violette Sza[illegible] probably wasn't quite as gung ho as she's depicted, though.

Putting the developer first

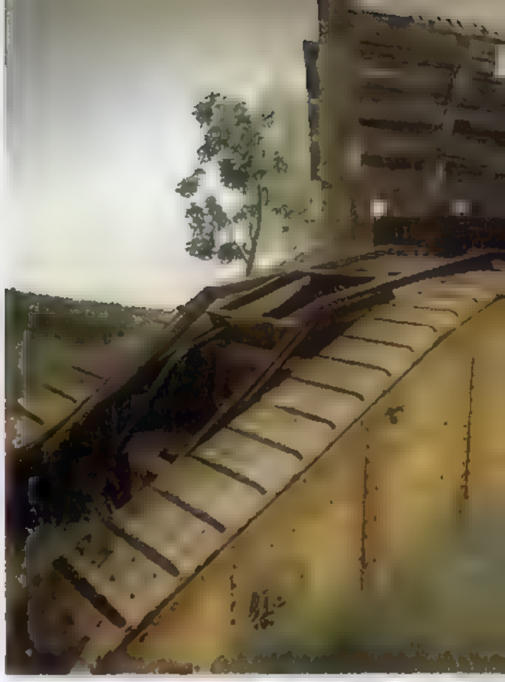
The title that Gamecock is upholding as the best example of its strategy working is an offbeat hack-and-slash-style console and PC action game entitled *Dungeon Hero*. The game is developed by UK based Firefly Studios, which established its PC-based *Stronghold* RTS series with Gathering, but wanted to create a brand new IP for Gamecock, alongside a new iteration of *Stronghold*. Wilson is keen to stress that the choice over what the developer would create was all Firefly's, however: "It's really nice proof of our philosophy. You don't have to own these guys to have a relationship with them." Firefly co-founder Simon Bradbury enjoys the freedom in production his studio receives: "I can't see how anyone wouldn't like that. Interesting games come from independence in development."

DUNGEON HERO

INTERVIEW

Notes from the trenches

We learn how To End All Wars intends to blow open the battles of the First World War



There have been enough WWII games in recent years to make even the most hardcore military enthusiasts cry into their replica coal scuttle helmets. WWI, meanwhile, has remained largely unexploited by the shooter genre. We spoke to Ghostlight's senior producer **Alasdair Evans** and marketing manager **Adrian Clews** about *To End All Wars* and how it plans to do justice to the killing fields of the Great War.

***Call Of Duty* recently moved to a modern setting – doesn't this suggest a fatigue with the historical FPS amongst the gaming public?**
Adrian Clews. Gaming is all about new experiences, regardless of the historical context. It would be a mistake to define a game by its setting rather than its gaming dynamics, and *To End All Wars* has very different dynamics to other firstperson shooters, even before you consider the originality of the WWI setting.

Why do you think the majority of historical shooters choose WWII as their setting?
AC: There is a global understanding of the events that took place in WWII, and this provides a huge knowledge-base for developers, giving them a head start in creating narrative, equipment and art assets. The smaller squad based tactics of WWII lend themselves to the capabilities of the last generation of consoles. WWI was invariably focused on huge theatres with little independent movement by troops. The current generation of consoles allows *TEAW* to do justice to the Great War for the first time.

Gearbox's Randy Pitchford recently claimed that the *Brothers In Arms* series truly honours the war dead while simultaneously featuring slow-motion shots of explosive dismemberment. Is there not a conflict between presenting the grim reality of the subject and the attempt to create an exhilarating gaming experience?
AC: You have to be very sensitive when approaching the subject of war. There are important ethical and emotional issues that have to be handled correctly. In our approach to WWI we have endeavoured to create an authentic WWI experience, and we don't shy away from depicting wounded and dying men, but neither do we do anything crass such as circling around these victims in bullet time. This is not only a matter of good taste – we feel that slow-motion sequences simply aren't justified in the context of a historic battle.

> **"We have endeavoured to create an authentic WWI experience, and we don't shy away from depicting wounded and dying men, but neither do we do anything crass"**

What about other game conventions? Presumably you will take liberties with the role of individual soldiers in order to give the player variety.
Alasdair Evans. We had to bend the rules in terms of the main character. By giving John Morgan a role in military intelligence, he has the freedom to move around the battlefields without being attached to a squad. Our research revealed a few precedents for this kind of troubleshooting officer. Morgan is able to ally himself with any friendly group as he encounters them, but this is always the player's decision. Morgan's unique role also justifies his movement from theatre to theatre, as he's assigned from one strategically vital battle to another. We believe we have delivered a truly authentic WWI experience while giving the player the freedom to explore the whole battlefield and employ many different tactics, weaponry and vehicles that they won't find anywhere else.

How does that freedom work in practice with regard to the structure of the game?
AE: The game has an advanced multi-layered mission structure. Opportunities will present themselves throughout the course of each battle and the player's decision-making and tactical skill will dictate the final outcome of the battle. For example, you may come across a mechanic fixing a tank. The player can choose to protect him from advancing German units or simply ignore him. If the player chooses to help, they will be rewarded with tank support, but by deciding to stay and defend the mechanic they may lose men and fall behind on other objectives. It's all about making key decisions in the heat of battle.

Driving this complex mission structure is an extremely advanced emergent AI system. It's brand new and never been seen before. Put simply, we've

"The infantry tactics of WWII are suited to a linear system of gameplay," says Evans. "When you're in the large-scale battles of WWI, this approach just doesn't work"

Ghostlight's Alasdair Evans (below left) and Adrian Clews are keen to stress that *TEAW* will stand apart from other games in the much-explored military shooter genre by dint of its non-linearity

Newswire

Toy Headquarters runs out of Juiced

THQ has announced that some of its flagship franchises are being discontinued, following a difficult year for the publisher. Both *Stuntman: Ignition* and *Juiced 2* underperformed commercially, and will be the last instalments in their respective series. *Conan* and *Ratatouille* have apparently met with an indifferent reception at retail – the former disappointingly so, being at the very least an accomplished romp. Also announced were the cancellations of the PS2 version of *Destroy All Humans!: Big Willy Unleashed* (above) and *Frontlines: Fuel Of War* on PS3. Finally, the internal Concrete Games Studio has been closed.

Evans' claim for *TEAW* is that the player will experience "all aspects of an entire battle simultaneously," rather than being channelled through a series of smaller, closed and heavily scripted encounters

got AI working in three tiers. Firstly, there's an overall commander AI system. This assesses the positions of friendly and enemy AI units and will direct squads around the battlefield to defend against potential breaks in the line, or punch a hole through any enemy weak points.

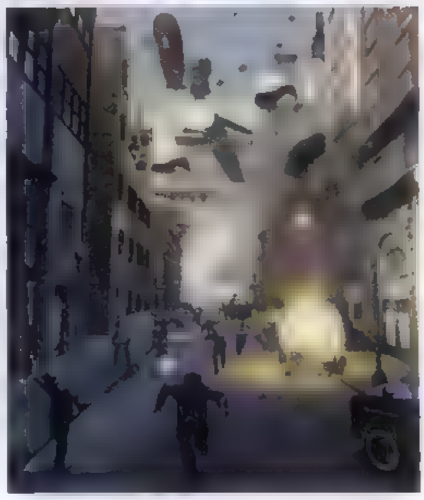
The second tier of AI operates on a squad level. Each squad has its instructions to carry out. As it moves around the battlefield and engages the enemy the squad will continually analyse what it's seeing around itself, look at what the best cover points are and position its individual men in the best possible position. For example, a machine gunner might be given priority to use the cover of a low wall. That way he has good cover while being able to keep his gun trained on the enemy and use the low wall to provide a wide arc of fire to pin those enemy soldiers down. The riflemen with him are more mobile and accurate. They'll focus on defending the machine gunner's flanks and picking off any middle-distance dangers.

The third and final tier works at an individual level, to preserve the life of each soldier. If a squad needs to advance across a field but it means one man is put under great risk, he'll look to preserve his own life first and obey the needs of the squad second. This will create a real sense of individuality with soldiers falling back to better cover as they see fit and generally acting as you'd expect a real soldier to. No scripted enemy behaviour, just hugely realistic and emergent battles.

Turning Point is another game with a poor demo that inspired vilification on the internet. With the game built in nine months, and the demo created two-thirds through that, the reasons seem clear

Getting a big bang with less of a buck

Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty's producer talks about making an FPS that doesn't want the *Halo* and *COD* comparisons



Spark Unlimited's *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty* (published by Codemasters) is an FPS that's been developed in a quarter of the time that the high profile blockbusters take. We spoke to producer **Dean Martinetti** (above right) about developing with a fraction of the resources the big boys can throw around.

Now the game's finished, how do you feel?
It's in certification now, and I feel really good. Better than I thought I was going to feel six months ago, to be honest with you.

Isn't WWII a little oversubscribed?
But this isn't WWII. This is our 'what if?' scenario about after WWII. It's complete fantasy, and that element, with the Germans invading America, is what attracted me to the game in the first place. That setting has let us do things no one else has thought about: there are these blueprints for so many Nazi prototypes that we found online. There are so many unclassified documents available, you find amazing stuff that the Germans had prototyped, like the Mouse tank, the stealth bomber, the G47 carbine and the infrared scope. We might put a little bit of a spin on it, because this is a game and we want people to have fun, but most of it we kept the way it was.

How long has *TP* been in development?
The development schedule was a year and three months. But we only really had nine months to build the game – and that's across three platforms. The lead SKU was the 360 – at the time the PS3 wasn't compatible with the Unreal Engine 3.

> **"It's complete fantasy, and that element, with the Germans invading America, is what attracted me to the game. That setting has let us do things no one else has thought about"**

And what did this mean for the game? You've said you just wanted it to be 'a fun blast'.
When we started working on the game, we saw the development schedule we had and what other companies had, and how long they'd be working for and what they were looking to do. So we had our own perspective, and first and foremost we think about fun. A game like this has to concentrate on being fun to play and enjoyable set pieces for the player – because if you're not having a good time, what's the point in the details?

Like a summer action movie?
There's a comparison there. Summer blockbusters have the scale and the thrills and the high-octane moments, and people come to expect that. When you play games people expect to be entertained and have fun. Fun is the key thing here, not how realistic it is or how many triangles are on the screen with X-amount of particle emitters shooting off at the same time. I think people enjoy the game because they just have a blast playing it. I had a 13 year old tell me he thought it was better than *COD4* – only because he could just pick it up and play and have a fun time. He didn't have to over think how to use everything. I had others tell me that it reminded them of old-school gaming and that it made them so happy because they didn't have to take 20 minutes to figure out the controls or some over-the-top HUD system.

And is there a robot Hitler at the end?
Ha! I wish! No, we opted out of that one.

Newswire

Manhunt 2 in the High Court

The latest twist in the *Manhunt 2* story came on January 25, when it was announced that the High Court had ordered the Video Appeals Committee to reconsider its overturning of the BBFC's original decision not to certificate the game in the UK. The VAC's decision had been accused by the BBFC of threatening to undermine its position as a content watchdog across all media, and Mr Justice Mitting told the VAC it had committed "a clear error of law" in its judgement. Rockstar pointed out that the game "contains content well within the bounds established by the BBFC's 18 plus ratings certification," and the saga rumbles on.

From left: CEO Alexis Galley and *Empire Of Sports'* lead designer Vincent Vimont. Around 100 staff work on two MMOGs at F4's Champs-Elysees office (below)

This sporting life

Talking tactics with the French team that's taking the fight to the Far East with its sports MMO

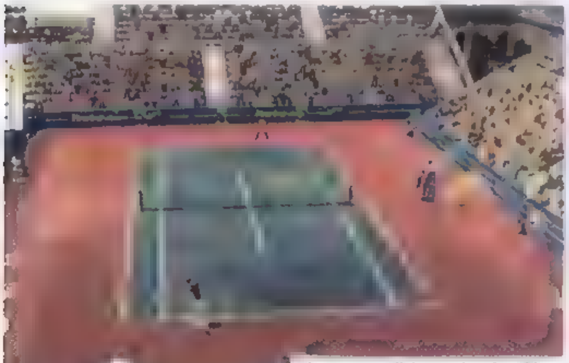
A joint venture between Parisian débutant developer F4 and Swiss sports rights management company InFront, *Empire Of Sports* is a brave, free-to-download, multiple-sport MMO game, recently signed for distribution in China. We visited F4's offices just off the Champs-Elysées for a preview of the game (see p36) and to discuss its intricacies with CEO **Alexis Galley** and lead designer **Vincent Vimont**

***Empire Of Sports*' development certainly seems to have been fast, for an MMOG.**

Vincent Vimont: In fact, we have another MMOG in development. We started it at the same time, we've been doing two MMOGs in two years. We are very proud of it, but at the moment we can't really talk about it, because it's a bit scary for people. "OK, did you have 300 staff for five years?" I've heard that. It's difficult for us to say we were less than 50 for a year and 100 for the second year, and we did two MMOs. To be honest, I don't even understand how we did it.

It's a major challenge for one studio to attempt seven sports games in one package. Did you ever consider doing fewer sports for the initial release?

Alexis Galley: No. We wanted to have a balance between games you can do on your own, like skiing for example, competitive one-against-one sports like tennis, co-operative sports like bobsleigh, and team sports. Through that we are addressing various needs and populations; I don't expect the non-gamers, for example, to immediately get into five-against-five basketball. They might try skiing. We wanted a multi-sports world.



Sportswear will tie in with real-world goods (right). "A new pair of shoes is important for a sports fan," says Vimont

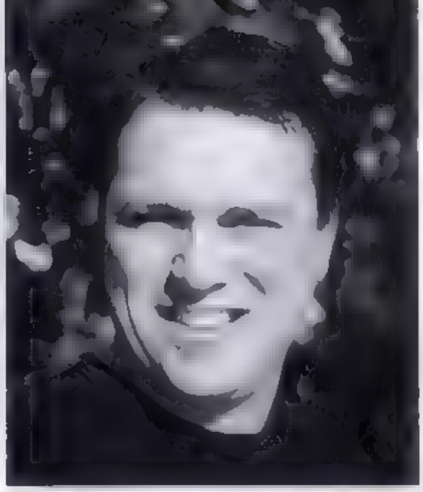
But aren't you worried that people will compare your game to *FIFA* or *Virtua Tennis*, and think it looks rather simplistic?

VV: Of course, we have to be careful with the message. We don't want to be compared, because we don't have to be. We do an MMO, that's our main message, and you can play several sports with one character – that is what is cool. These are not minigames, these are real sports games, but don't hope to see a realistic game – we don't do simulation games. We are between simulation and arcade.

Do you think it will be difficult to propose an item-selling model to a European audience?

AG: I don't think so. I think it should work, as it has worked in Asia. For me, the cultural excuse that many people raise, saying the Korean people are different – I don't see why. They have the same brands there. I really think that they were in advance because of the broadband penetration. That penetration has now taken off in Europe. I don't see the European people – people, I say, not necessarily gamers – as different from the Asian people. In the middle term, my estimation is that it should be the same model. In between, obviously people are used to the subscription model. So it's a question of not being too early, and not being too late.

"These are not minigames, these are real sports games, but don't hope to see a realistic game – we don't do simulation games"



In space, everyone can see your screen

Dungeons, annihilation and sieges are Gas Powered Games' specialty – but its latest tries to bring a little more sophistication to the party

Chris Taylor (above right) is the founder and CEO of Gas Powered Games, as well as the lead developer on *Total Annihilation* and the *Dungeon Siege* series. We caught up with him at the recent Consumer Electronics Show to talk about the studio's upcoming *Space Siege*.

How's the reaction to *Space Siege* been from Microsoft and in general?
Pretty good. We've got a demo that people like, and PC games like this tend to come together in the last stretch. So I'm feeling good about it – and it's not like a movie trailer where they show you all the best bits in 60 seconds anyway. There are still some secrets and surprises!

It's hard for us to know what Microsoft is thinking, because they're showing a few games here [at CES]. The booth here is about the Windows gaming world, I guess. But Microsoft are showing a strong support in general for Windows gaming, and that's great – God love 'em.

Any plans for Xbox 360?
We're thinking about it, but there's nothing official yet.

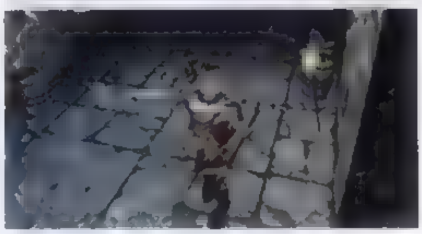
What's the concept behind *Space Siege*?
Initially, the idea was for an action-RPG in space with laser guns and aliens. But we wanted to focus on a person rather than having a generic character the player creates. "Let's do a story about a single character, like Solid Snake or Gordon Freeman." So we created Seth Walker, and a story where he makes choices and has some dilemmas. In this case he has to decide whether he's going to replace parts of his body, parts of his humanity, and become more robotic. Now, that's a gameplay choice because Seth is more deadly the more robotic he is – the game becomes easier. It makes it easier to save humanity, but he becomes less human.

That's a little twist in itself – and his love interest in the game, [illegible]na, actually falls out of love with him because he's a robot. She's not his girlfriend at the beginning, but there's a relationship there that can develop, or it can un-develop depending on how you want to play. So it's sort of fun to play through it, become a robot and blast things away, and then maybe think about trying to do it the other way.

You mention *Half-Life* – is that an inspiration for how the story's told?
We do it by intercutting little slices of dialogue while the characters are running down hallways, opening doors, going through rooms. We don't have the typical back and forth town you'd find in an action RPG, talking to merchants and characters that stand on street corners and give you ten pages of text. That's a boring way to advance story. Here, other characters talk to you through the radio, and narrative's generally done through ongoing conversation and piecing things together rather than listening to one character's news report after every section.

Apart from the story, this game is about being able to sit down, throw away the manual, skip the tutorial, and have everything just happen the way you think it should happen – you should never feel overwhelmed or confused, and if you do then we've done our job poorly.

> "This game is about being able to sit down, throw away the manual, skip the tutorial, and have everything just happen the way you think it should happen"


Dungeon Siege was the breakthrough title for GPG, and has spawned many a sequel – though Taylor no longer owns the IP

Space Siege has simple point'n'click controls, and there are plenty of horrible insectoid enemies just waiting to take a hot laser blast to the carapace – and there are skilltrees, spells and various different weapons that will enhance your ability to deliver such horrible death

WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

With a catalogue sampling over 200 videogame soundtracks, Music 4 Games would be a useful resource even if it didn't contain interviews with composers working in the industry. One of the more interesting conversations is with Tomoko Sasaki and Naofumi Hataya, two of the composers behind *Nights: Journey Of Dreams*, as they discuss the difficulties of meeting gamers' expectations. Another interview sees the collaborators on *Unreal Tournament 3*'s soundtrack detail the complexities of an adaptive music system that mixes themes on the fly. The dialogue tends to be fairly in-depth, but for those who can tell Techstep from Industrial/EBM and know which way up to hold a Moog, there's plenty of useful insight, not just in terms of the creative process, but in the practicalities of integrating a score with something as dynamic as a game.

Site
Music 4 Games
[illegible]
www.music4games.net

Though it may look a bit Star Trek from a distance, when your face is right there in front of the screen and focused on the action, the setup is only noticeable in the best sense

Ubisoft drawn in by aura of amBX

Philips continues its drive towards the complete 'ambient experience', with new publisher support

Philips has been promoting various incarnations of its ambient technology for several years: the original Ambilight now comes installed in some of the company's televisions, and the more extensive version – amBX, with its set of PC gaming peripherals – promises to physically involve the player with videogames. Philips announced a major coup at January's Consumer Electronics Show: a partnership with Ubisoft that ensures amBX compatibility with several major releases, and backdated to some older titles, including the original *Far Cry*. The two major new titles announced were *Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway* and *Far Cry 2*, both of which will fully support the technology – although unfortunately, only the former was in a state to be demonstrated, but it affords plenty of opportunities for amBX-specific effects.

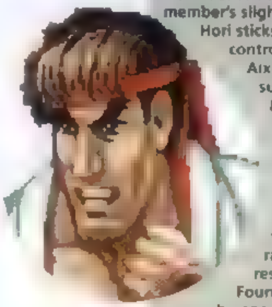
When a grenade explodes, the pad rumbles under your wrists, the lights go bright white to match the onscreen explosion, and the fans blow cold air in your face

Those effects have the potential to be manifold, with the latest technology incorporating a variety of stimuli that (theoretically) operate upon the player in sync with the game's environments and situations: there are two lights and two fans either side of the screen, and a rumble-rest placed at the base of the keyboard. The lighting units in particular are well made and visually attractive, while the wrist-rest is perfectly functional. The only black mark strikes against the fan units, which seem a little too lightweight and noisy to sit convincingly as part of a dynamic gaming PC.

Once all of the kit is set up, the games supported thus far prove something of a mixed bag: the patch for *Quake 4*, for instance, simulates general lighting reasonably effectively, but fails to register spot effects in the form of the game's strobing red alarm lights. It may be that the amBX lights are not capable of such subtleties, and indeed those effects may be considered superfluous on a device designed to work on your peripheral vision. But when Philips is asking gamers to pay £279 for a device to enhance the ambience of gaming environments, these situations aren't minor: they're exactly what amBX should be exploiting in its quest for greater player immersion.

But amBX does have moments that show its true potential, one in particular a thing of beauty: at a certain point in the demo of *Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway*, a grenade is thrown. When it explodes, the pad rumbles under your wrists, the lights go bright white to match the onscreen explosion and the fans blow air into your face. Similarly, the use of warning lights to signal alerts in *DefCon* is the opposite of ambience but completely apposite for the experience. Both are remarkable feats of immersion, and show the potential of the technology beyond the current crop of titles.

Philips has suggested that there will be no news of amBX console support until at least the end of 2008, and whether the company will be able to push its technology to the ubiquity of, say, surround sound without that cross-platform capability is doubtful. Deals with the likes of Ubisoft help, and many more developers and publishers will come on board to test the waters in future. But until amBX games make the individual innovations of *Brothers In Arms* and *DefCon* into a comprehensive whole – and really make it an essential, rather than a peripheral, part of the playing experience – the setup will continue to feel like a luxury.



COUP DE GRACE

It's a fact underscored by one **Edge** team member's slightly unnerving obsession with Hori sticks: the fighting game is all about control. Patch & KO, an exhibition at Aix-en-Provence's School of Art, subverts this principle: *Street Fighter II* controlled only by the semi-random movement of balls through a pachinko board. The result of a collaboration between artists Antonin Fourneau and Manuel Braun, the installation forces the player to accept that victory in this precision game of rapid reaction comes largely as the result of chaos. Oddly, according to Fourneau's blog, it's partly inspired by one-time **Edge** columnist Steven Poole. Order from chaos, indeed.

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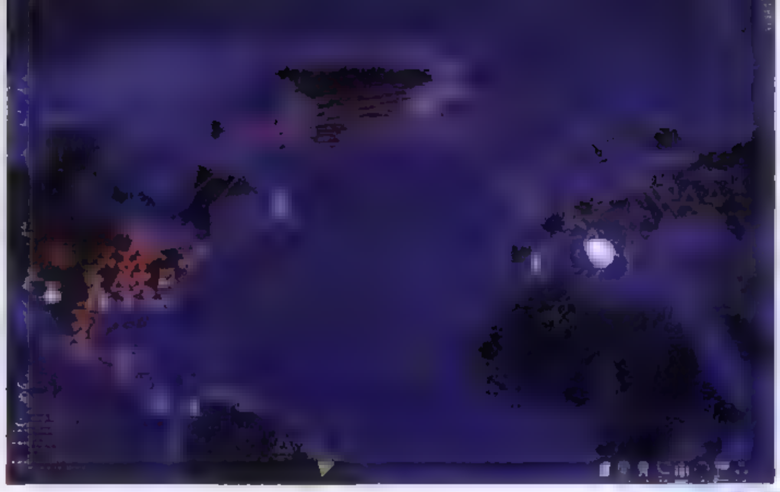
DEVELOPMENT

Piping hot

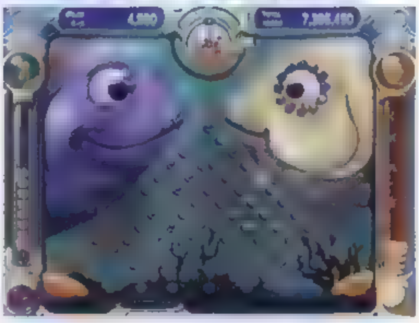
Valve may have the solution to a pain in the back-end



Even if Steam wasn't already an essential application for PC gamers, Valve has made it impossible to ignore. Following the improvements to the service in the last year, it has now released the platform's suite of publishing tools for free to publishers and developers. This delivers access to Steam's realtime stats tracking, data encryption system, voice-chat, matchmaking and community services as well as offering a means of distribution to 13 million active customers.

Although up until last year Valve had showed little energy in consolidating its dominance of digital distribution, with the release of this suite of tools, which can be used in any combination or number, Steam becomes a hugely attractive proposition for developers. However, a game doesn't even need to be distributed via Steam to make use of the features on offer, which are also freely available to titles sold at retail.

"Developers and publishers are spending more and more time and money cobbling together all the tools and back-end systems needed to build and launch a successful title in today's market," said Valve MD **Gabe Newell**. "Steamworks puts all those tools and systems together in one free package, liberating publishers and developers to concentrate on the game instead of the plumbing."



As Valve business director Jason Holtman told Next-Gen.biz: "By not charging for this, it's just another way to get more people on to Steam. Our motivations here are pretty clear."

Continue

"We've got a *Donkey Kong* kill screen coming up!"

Finally, only one high-def format to slo-o-owly adopt

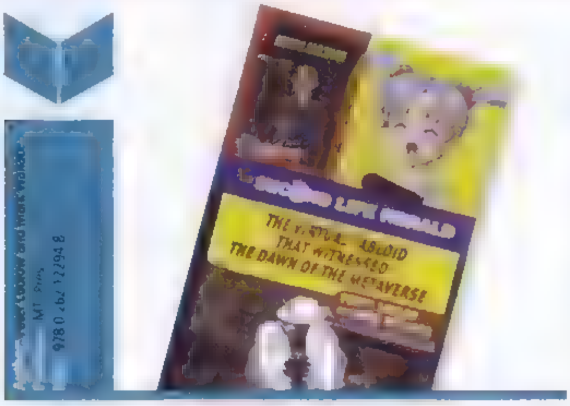
They say it's lucky. We say it worked for us during CES

Quit

With CES finished, we were strangely drawn to *Wii Fit*

Yes, of course it's a worthy challenger to DS and PSP

"You suck!" "Shut up, Mr Ploppy-Pants!" And so on



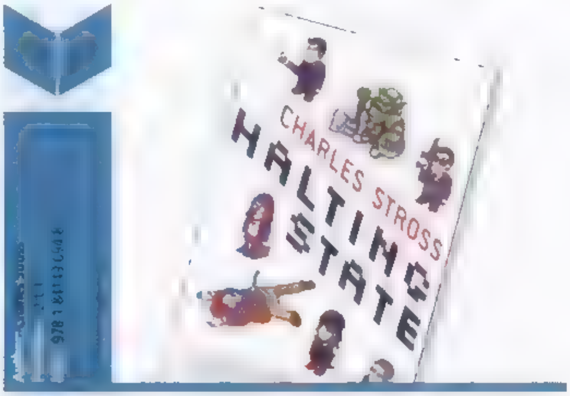
THE SECOND LIFE HERALD

From The Sims Online to Second Life, Peter Ludlow's in-game newspapers have highlighted what's going on

The fact that online worlds provide interesting otherspaces into which real-world beliefs, actions and communities are diced and recombined into juicy new configurations has become a platitude. Perhaps that's why there are so many boring books about what should be a singularly significant subject. Thankfully, though, despite being mistitled, The Second Life Herald manages to avoid the worst excesses of the 'shock horror: people pay real money for digital items' school of journalism.

Still, that it's called The Second Life Herald is a little confusing, considering the bulk of the analysis takes place in *The Sims Online*, this being the game in which professor of philosophy Peter Ludlow started up his online newspaper The Alphaville Herald. It proved to be a remarkable undertaking, which like the best local media produced a stream of reports ranging from minor complaints to scams, griefings and investigations into the various organised groups that came to run life in the game.

Indeed, it seems to be the growing stature of Ludlow (in the form of avatar Urizenus) and his paper to highlight problems on the ragged edge of in-game actions, and the legal ramifications for publisher EA, that resulted in his eventual official banishment. It was only a short hop to *Second Life*, however, where he established The Second Life Herald, a project in which he is aided by journalist Mark Wallace. This book is the distillation of those years, and well worth the read.

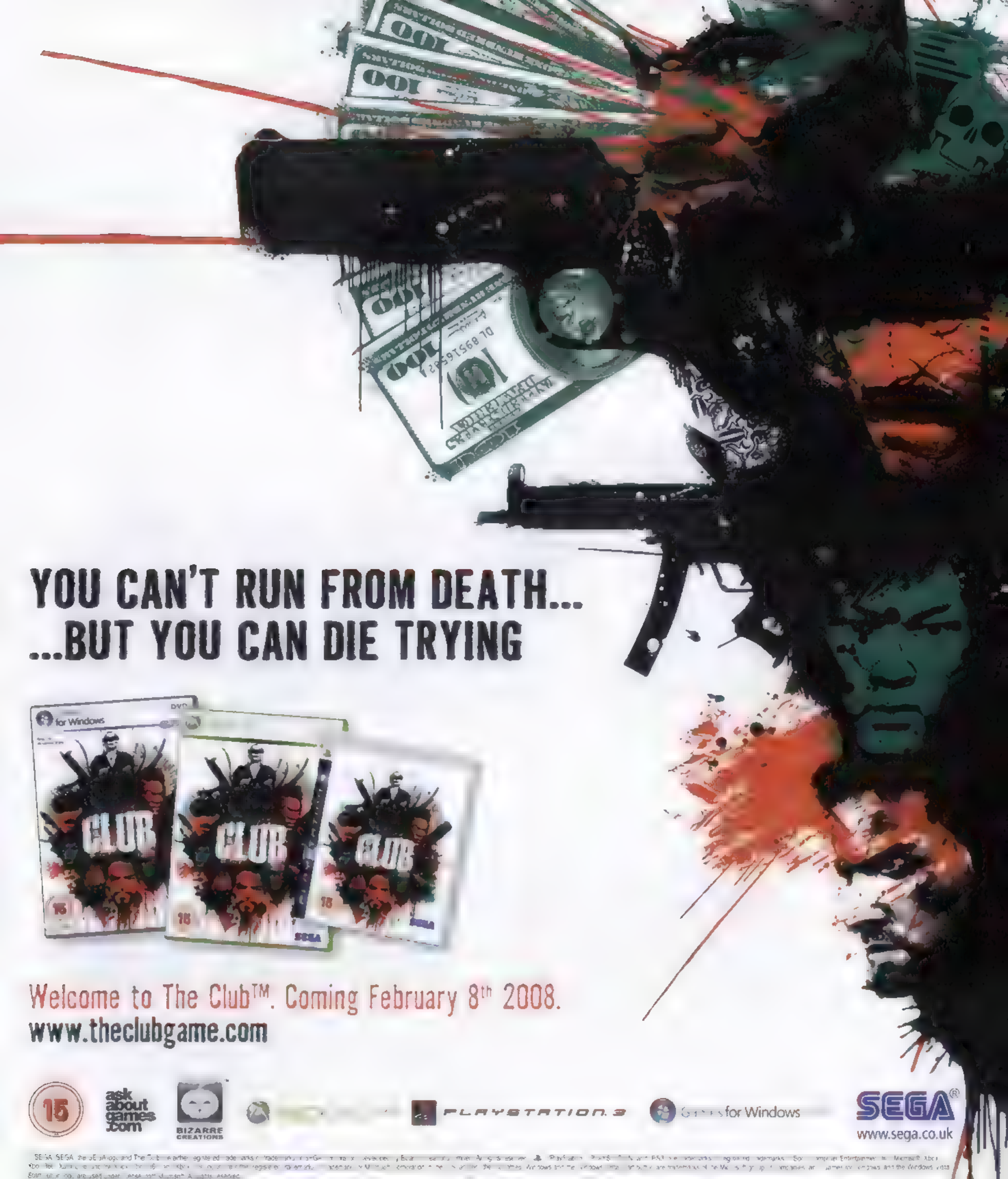


HALTING STATE

Cybercrime in an MMOG is the focus of Charles Stross's interesting, if jargon-strewn, novel

As if to underline that MMOGs are getting everywhere, the latest novel from UK sci-fi writer Charles Stross starts off with the online gaming equivalent of breaking and entering Fort Knox. A group of orcs, backed by a large dragon, shimmer from one game into another, nerf the admins and walk off with all the gold and items from the central bank. It should be impossible, but it's happened. Back in the real world, in an ex-nuclear bunker under Edinburgh, the executives of Hayek Associates, a recently floated outfit which runs the economies of several online games, are in for a hard time. The police have been called and are confused, and a group of mean-looking lawyers from London have flown up to uncover incompetence and avoid the blame themselves. Meanwhile, the game's lead programmer is missing. Sadly, resetting the servers isn't an option.

Told as an ensemble piece from the various viewpoints of a lesbian cop, freelance game developer (overweight but heroic, of course) and a forensic auditor, all of whom are looking to solve the whodunnit, the result can be hard work, if only for the amount of jargon that punctuates almost every exchange. Stross has obviously done his homework, as well as using the opportunity of a near-future setting to get creative with ideas such as online games that run on distributive servers using their players' mobile phones. But perhaps that's why Halting State might be better placed on shelves marked 'technical writing' than fiction.



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[illegible]

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Resistance 2

FORMAT PS3 PUBLISHER S

Nathan Hale blasts his way from Iceland to the US, where the Chimera invasion continues. A separate co-op campaign supports up to eight online, 'epic' being the internet-friendly watchword

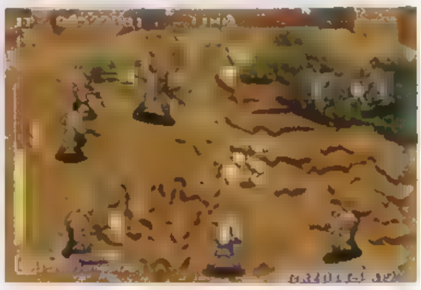
Battlefield: Heroes

FORMAT PC PUBLISHER EA

Free to play, funded by micropayments and ads, this DICE spin-off marks EA's first major endorsement of east-Asian online models. Quite what Valve thinks of its artistic 'departure' is unknown

SNK Arcade Classics: Volume 1

FORMAT [illegible] PSP PUBLISHER SNK PLAYMORE



The 16 games suggest a stubbornly chronological collection, most irksomely choosing *Shock Troopers* and *Art Of Fighting* over their superior sequels. Still, at least Volume 2 won't be disappointing

Highlander

FORMAT 360 PC PS3 PUBLISHER EIDOS

It's all very well saying there can be only one – but one what? A hectic, globe-trotting, supernatural slash 'em up, it seems, Owen Macleod turning 'the quickening' into spectacular special moves

Leisure Suit Larry: Box Office Bust

FORMAT 360 PC PS3 PUBLISHER SIERRA

Larry does *GTA*, apparently, flexing his muscle at racing, puzzling, platforming and exploration. The talent includes Carmen Electra, Shannon Elizabeth and writers from Happy Madison Productions

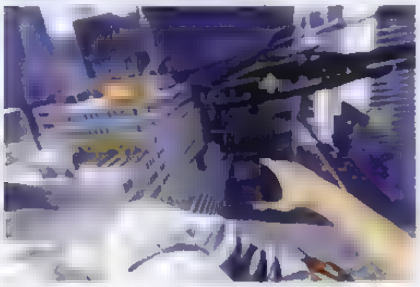
Fracture

FORMAT 360 PS3 PUBLISHER LUCASARTS

Weaponry and physics have long been the stars of LucasArts environmentally unfriendly shooter, just as well given the 'new' look of hero Jet Brody, which isn't exactly groundbreaking

Mirror's Edge

FORMAT 360 PC PS3 PUBLISHER EA



Possibly the screenshot of the year, if only because someone remembered to turn the anti-aliasing on. Don't be surprised if DICE pulls off a faithful end result, stunning as that would be

Stargate Worlds

FORMAT PC PUBLISHER CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN

Its trailer debuted this month during the mid-season return of Stargate Atlantis, suggesting marketing folk as shrewd as the design team. A shame, though, that the action was entirely CGI

Virtua Fighter 5

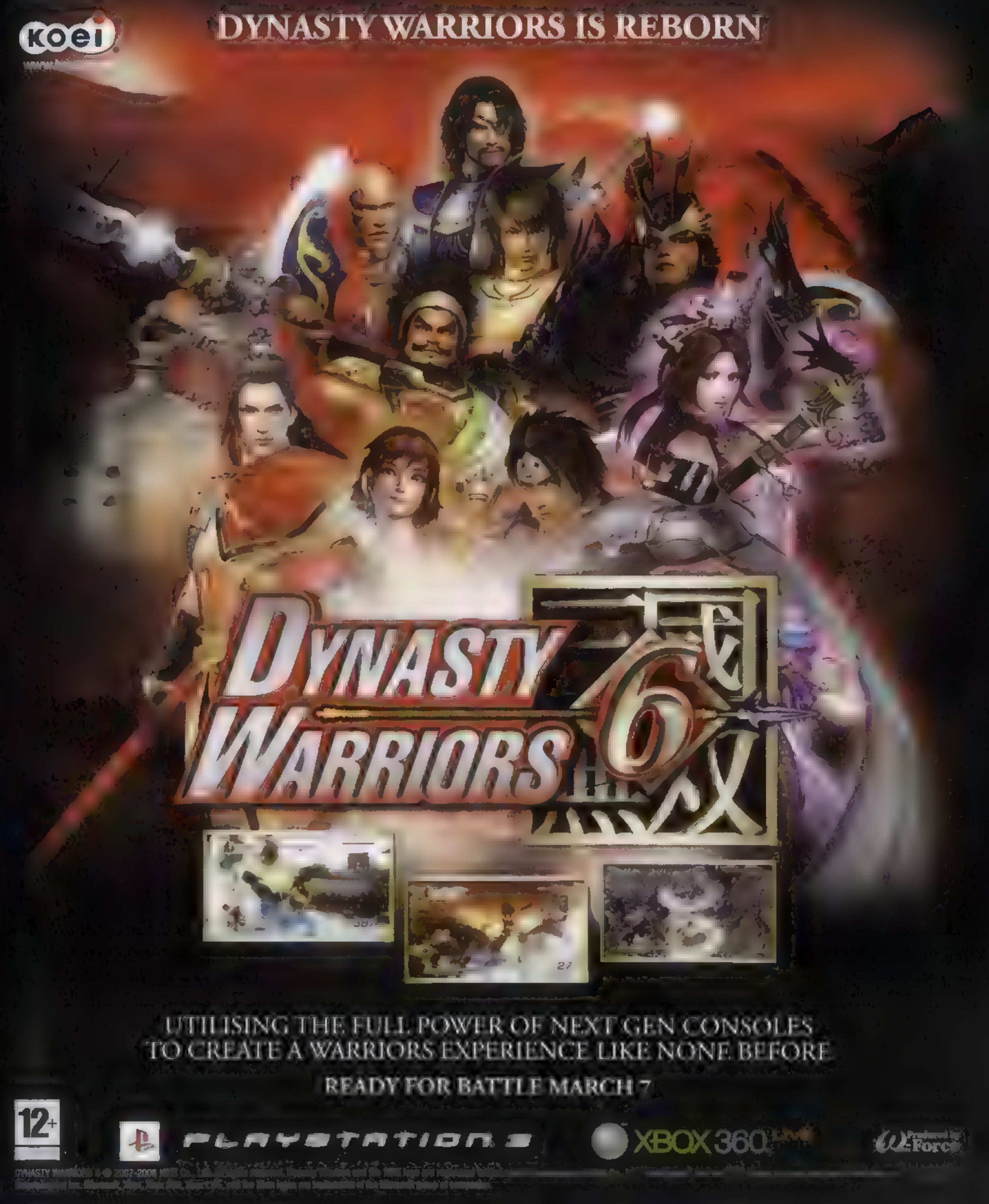
FORMAT 360 PUBLISHER SEGA

The residency of *VF5* 360 on this page says everything about the beatdown handed to PS3's one-time exclusive. The latest patch adds online replay saving and mix'n'match costume selection

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Apparently built simply to goad a work colleague as he suffered through it, *Syobon Action* is an acutely observed and ruthless spoof of platforming conventions. Taking the original *Super Mario Bros* as its template, it punishes the player at every opportunity. Death comes in many, many forms, sabotaging your expectations with a cruelty that quickly becomes hilarious: invisible blocks are placed at the predicted apex of a jump, sending you plummeting into a pit below, parts of the scenery inexplicably fall away beneath you, and innocent-looking pipes might as easily fire you off to your doom as provide entry to another part of the level.

Later, a suspiciously coloured section of the ceiling above you falls, and you dodge it, only to find that the rest of the ceiling falls, too. Power-ups may prove equally deadly – why should a star signify invincibility? Why would a super-sized avatar be beneficial? *Syobon Action* is witty and aware, as well as being absurdly difficult. We were pleased to get to the end having only lost 161 lives.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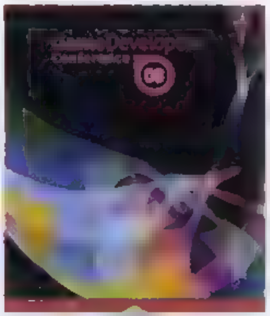
NEXT GENERATION This month's guide to **Edge**'s online home



Next-Gen at GDC

Next-Gen has a large team of reporters covering the most invigorating and fascinating event in the gaming calendar We'll be reporting from the Moscone Centre in San Francisco, as well as the surrounding hotel suites and party venues, bringing live coverage of the conference sessions and keynotes as well as gossip from the party circuit and interviews with the leading names in game development.

Hot 100 developers

Which game creators will make the biggest noises in 2008?

Next-Gen's annual Hot 100 Developers List is based on European, Japanese and North American sales; review scores; consumer anticipation for forthcoming titles; and predicted sales of new titles.

Published on the first day of GDC, it's a central conversation piece for delegates eager to see if they – or their rivals – have risen or fallen in the brutal world of actual game sales and consumer regard.

Last year, the list was topped by Cliff Bleszinski, lead designer at Epic Games, enjoying the glow of success surrounding Gears Of War. He beat the likes of Eiji Aonuma and Shigeru Miyamoto (Nintendo), Gabe Newell of Valve (pictured right), Blizzard duo Michael Morhaime and Chris Metzen, and Greg LoPiccolo (Harmonix).

This year's list will be as controversial as ever, with new names popping into the Hot 100 to show that time waits for no developer. It's always interesting to note the number of women in the list (still in single figures) and the comparative numbers of developers [illegible]

REGULARS

GAME RELEASE SCHEDULE

Your up-to-date guide to all game releases in Europe and North America

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WORLD DEVELOPER LIST

A guide to the world's developers and the games they're working on right now

www.next-gen.biz/worlddevelopers

EDGE CONTENT AND BLOG

If you've missed a recent issue of Edge, you can now head to Next-Gen to read and discuss a selection of features, reviews and previews from the magazine. And, on the Edge blog, you'll find extra interviews, reports and news that we can't fit on these pages. Recent entries include:

- Extra material from our interview with the developers of *Empire Of Sports* (see p15 and 38), including details of how they intend to sell their MMO to a wide cross-section of the public.
- An interview with Josch Drescher, associate producer on *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* (right), in which he sets his MMO apart from *WOW*
- More from our interview with the developers of *To End All Wars* (see p12).

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[illegible] **Mass Effect** See pack for legal **Project Gotham Racing 4** [illegible] **Gears Of War** [illegible] **Forza Motorsport 2** [illegible] **Bioshock** [illegible] **Condemned 2** [illegible] **Rainbow Six Vegas 2** [illegible]

Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Wii Fit

Wii Fit (see E185) is being positioned as a 'lifestyle product' New markets mean new customers and success for Nintendo

What comes next?

Analyst Piers Harding-Rolls on hardware evolution in the battle for a place underneath your television

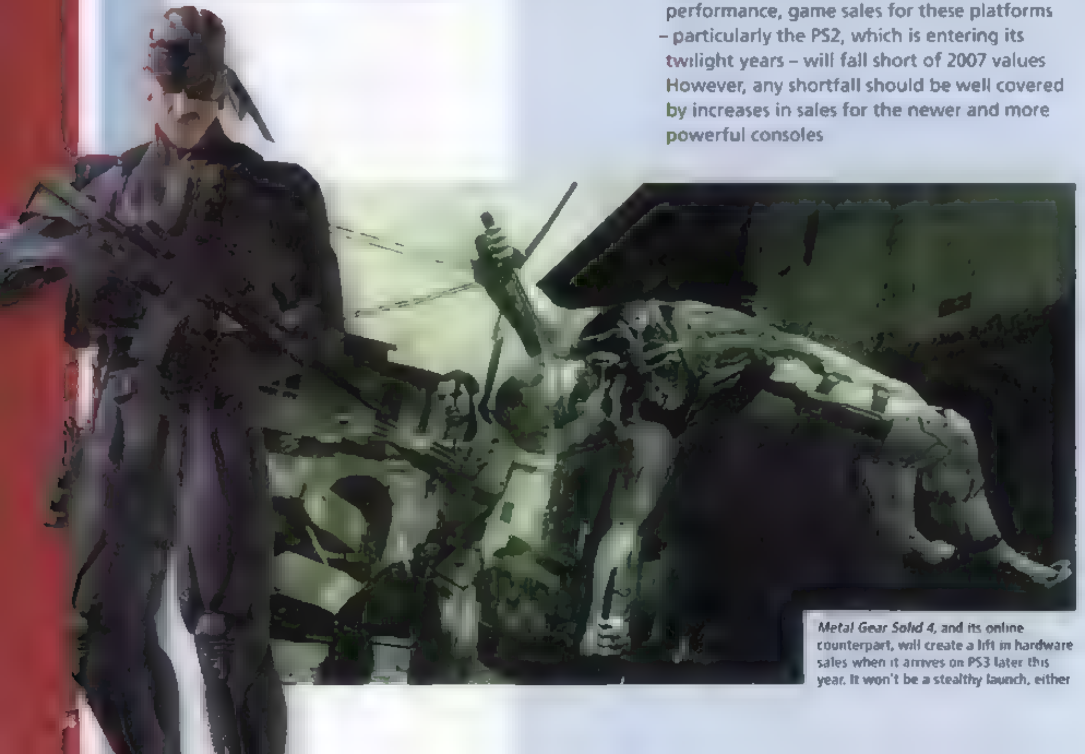
It's still early in the year, so it seems an appropriate time to take a look at how we expect 2008 to pan out in the console space. Last year was a record one for games retail in North America and Europe (Japan's performance was almost flat following a strong 2006) and, although the average gamer's overall entertainment spend may be reined in during 2008, we currently expect game sales this year to outperform 2007, as the current generation of consoles continues to march towards the mass adoption phase and some big game franchises hit the platforms

Compared to 2007, sales of games in 2008 will rely more heavily on the performance and high average sales prices of games for the latest consoles. Although PS2 and handheld platforms will continue to contribute a significant share to the total market performance, game sales for these platforms – particularly the PS2, which is entering its twilight years – will fall short of 2007 values However, any shortfall should be well covered by increases in sales for the newer and more powerful consoles

In 2007 Nintendo delivered admirably on its target to extend the appeal of the Wii and its software to non-traditional gamers, and was very successful in catching the public's imagination. The success of this new and previously untested strategy to prompt adoption by more female and older consumers caught many publishers and industry analysts by surprise. The relatively weak performance of Nintendo's GameCube and the unknown quantity of the Wii's input technology meant many commentators were cautious about their predictions for the potential success of the Wii

As it is, Nintendo has out-performed many of these early predictions with the Wii and as the installed base of the console has almost already reached that of the GameCube, it is crystal clear now that Nintendo will improve its share of the market considerably compared to the last generation. Even so, the sustainability of Nintendo's Wii success is up for debate. Whether this fantastic sales run can be bettered in 2008 will depend upon Nintendo's ability to keep prompting non-gamers to invest in the platform by introducing new and innovative software products *Wii Fit* is a perfect example of the type of content Nintendo intends to promote to keep consumer interest at a high level

While we expect 2008 to be another strong year for Nintendo as its momentum continues, we also expect Sony's PS3 to enjoy stronger



Metal Gear Solid 4, and its online counterpart, will create a lift in hardware sales when it arrives on PS3 later this year. It won't be a stealthy launch, either

screendigest
www.screendigest.com

Sony's own PS3 brands this year will be led by the likes of *Gran Turismo 5* and *LittleBigPlanet* (see p32), two different, but equally slick, polished, propositions

sales in the coming months. Sony's pipeline of exclusive games and the launch of multimedia services may result in a significant uplift for PS3 in 2008. Major exclusive game IPs heading to the console this year include *Metal Gear Solid, Buzz!, Gran Turismo, Killzone, Resistance* and, of course, *LittleBigPlanet*.

Although games will remain key for console adoption, one of the major trends in 2008 will be the continued evolution of the Xbox 360 and PS3 from game consoles to multimedia hubs and how that shift, if communicated well to the consumer, could help attract new users to the platforms.

> **Although games will remain key, one of the major trends in 2008 will be the continued evolution of the Xbox 360 and PS3 from game consoles to multimedia hubs**

In November last year the PS3 began its life as a set-top box on South Korean telco KT's service MegaTV, beating Microsoft in the race to deploy a console in the TV space. Similarly, BT Vision is to become the first operator to offer the Xbox 360 as an alternative to a set-top box for its TV service. From mid-2008, BT will begin marketing Microsoft's game console as an option for new and existing BT Vision customers, allowing users to view BT Vision applications and services via the gaming platform. While the Korean game market is predominantly PC-based and therefore limited as a commercial opportunity for IPTV-driven PS3 sales compared to more established console markets, the UK gamer clearly loves the 360. Two million UK consumers already own Microsoft's console – and the software giant will be looking to boost UK penetration further through this deal with BT.

Aside from these IPTV developments, Microsoft has been very active with its video-on-demand service for movie and TV content to Xbox 360 owners in the US and key European markets. The company's recent TV content deal with Disney is the latest in a series between the two companies to offer content through the Xbox Live Marketplace: movies from Disney became available to rent through the store in July 2007, with sports content from Disney-owned ESPN added in November. With ABC signed up, Microsoft's store now hosts television shows for US consumers from the 'big four' US television networks – including Fox, NBC and CBS.

Now that these multimedia services – online video, IPTV, digital terrestrial TV and PVR functionality – are becoming available or are poised to come online in different markets, this 'hub' strategy is emerging as a key console battlefront for Microsoft and Sony in 2008.

Series recording scheduled
BATMAN FOREVER

Streaming TV and video on demand are services both Microsoft and Sony are keen to push, with PS3 also getting a TV adaptor. How MS's deal with BT Vision pans out remains to be seen

Square Enix's *Dragon Quest IV* on the DS is the game's second remake, having appeared on the PlayStation in 2001, 11 years after its Japanese debut on the NES. Didn't stop it selling, though

SOMETHING ABOUT japan

Everything old is new again

Game producer Brick Bardo sees remakes everywhere

I've been playing a lot of *Super Mario Galaxy* for the Wii recently. I only intended to play the game a little to see what it was like, but I was completely sucked into it. One aspect of the game in particular impressed me: the camera system was so smooth and follows you at what seems to be the best angle all the time. It's maybe one of the only times when I didn't feel stressed playing in a 3D world because of the camera moving all over the place. I also noticed this talent for angles and rethinking spaces in the way the game reused some of the same maps in various ways. Really, it's a masterpiece.

And as I'm starting to be concerned about my health, I went along with many others to buy *Wii Fit*. I started my own little fitness regime – considering *Wii Fit* as a videogame experience is a disappointment and misses the point a little, I suppose, but I have to admit my admiration for Nintendo turning it into a massmarket proposition It looks like the Balance Board is becoming a popular accessory so it could become an interesting control device for other games something I'm always thinking as I try to perform those yoga techniques

I'm also interested by the end of backward compatibility in the PS3 This can't be anything other than SCE saying Stop making games for the PS2! Stop playing with that console!' It certainly is a way to try and push the market toward a PS3 which is still struggling to find its own niche But the PS2 is still seen as a viable platform by many users, and game-makers worry about making something when it looks like many are abandoning the PlayStation world

> The PS3 is still struggling to find its own niche, and the PS2 is still seen as a viable platform by many users Game makers worry about making something when it looks like many are abandoning the PlayStation world

There are a lot of remakes around at the moment, and I bought the DS remake of *Card Hero* The original game was simple, but well balanced with incredible depth to the experience This remake seems as involving in its basic mechanics but the developers have found it necessary to incorporate a very basic scenario around the game's events Do we really need something that would normally be a tutorial? I'm pretty sure users would have preferred something more accomplished and interesting, or nothing at all

I've also finished *Dragon Quest IV* on the DS hadn't played this game since its original release on the Famicom This remake is a great example of the classic Japanese RPG, very well made and having a pleasant nostalgia about it I took real pleasure in Yuji Horii's skill in creating an intricate and involving scenario and his careful choice of words

Moving from games to movies have you seen the 3D version of Beowulf? It was apparently edited in such a way that took full advantage of 3D, but having watched the standard 2D version as well didn't think it had much more to offer Does shiny technology make a movie any more interesting?

As certain film-makers go down the 3D road further think they won't need actors any more

Wii Fit may disappoint as a gaming experience, but that's not really the point. With Balance Boards now in many homes, expect more game-focused software to follow

as everything will be focused on producing the most immersive effects. But would this make a movie any good? Previously, I've mentioned 300, and some have said that Beowulf has something similar to 300, but I couldn't disagree more, and can't help looking at the direction of Beowulf 3D with mixed feelings. I've been a Zemeckis fan since his 1978 film I Wanna Hold Your Hand, but this made me think twice.

There are remakes in the movies as well. I went to see Tsubaki Sanjuro recently. This is a remake of Akira Kurosawa's most acclaimed movie, but the people in the theatre had very mixed feelings about it. Since this is a remake, the story is still interesting, but without anything more than that a remake doesn't make sense, and the original version still seems sufficient. So what's the point of making it again?

Another time, I met someone I know to give him some advice on a game project. While talking about his innovative game system he was filled with confidence. But I was more concerned and told him my thoughts about why people might not choose to use the system – there were a few reasons, such as the core interest of the game being potentially shallow. So I told him this, as that's what I was there for. But he could not accept my point. I'm always puzzled when people who don't have a deep experience of gaming think they know exactly what people want.

Finally, I got some news about one of the major games being developed right now from a friend on the project, and it absolutely shocked me. The non-interactive movies in the game exceed eight hours – even combining all three Pirates Of The Caribbean films wouldn't match that. In many ways, I found it confusing – I suppose it's quite an unusual game we have here. Can you guess what it is?

Perhaps I shouldn't have been so blunt? Back in November I was invited to a university to speak on stage. The theme was 'problems with CGI in the games industry'. I'm used to speaking in front of many people and presenting a project. However I'm not so used to acting as a lecturer, and I have to confess it has been quite an experience for me. I was asked to speak truthfully about the industry. So, perhaps naively, I did – and gave copious examples. With hindsight, I'm afraid I broke down some of the dreams and ambitions of the students who were listening. Oh, we

Monster Hunter Portable 2

Yearly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales 2007

Software (lifetime sales).
1. *Wii Sports* (Nintendo, Wii): 1,911,520 (2,464,734)
2. *Monster Hunter Portable 2* (Capcom, PSP): 1,489,898
3. *Hajimete No Wii* (Nintendo, Wii): 1,487,484 (1,990,669)
4. *Pokemon Fushigi No Dungeon* (Nintendo, DS): 1,256,516
5. *Mario Party DS* (Nintendo, DS): 1,232,644
6. *New Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, DS): 1,176,939 (4,995,153)
7. *Pokemon Diamond & Pearl* (Nintendo, DS): 1,094,389 (5,397,204)
8. *Mario Party 8* (Nintendo, Wii): 1,053,934
9. *Dragon Quest IV* (Square Enix, DS): 1,052,827
10. *Motto Nouwo Kitaeru Otona No DS Training* (Nintendo, DS): 1,033,933 (4,782,571)

Hardware (lifetime sales):
1. DS: 7,143,702 (21,105,472)
2. Wii: 3,629,361 (4,618,479)
3. PSP: 3,022,659 (7,535,313)
4. PlayStation 3: 1,206,347 (1,673,063)
5. PlayStation 2: 816, 419 (21,067,138)

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Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

32 **LittleBigPlanet**
PS3

34 **Tomb Raider: Underworld**
360 DS PC PS2 PS3 Wii

36 **Empire Of Sports**
PC

38 **Project Origin**
360 PC PS3

39 **Alone In The Dark**
360 PC PS2 PS3 Wii

40 **De Blob**
DS Wii

41 **Disgaea 3**
PS3

42 **Lego Batman**
360 DS PC PSP PS2 PS3 Wii

43 **Sega Superstars Tennis**
360 PS3 Wii

43 **Schizoid**
360

44 **Just Cause 2**
360 PS3

44 **Baroque**
PS2 Wii

Edge's most wanted

Fable 2

Just for the record, before Molyneux hypes it up again in his talk at GDC, we're really looking forward to *Fable 2*, and not just because of the doggie.
360 MICROSOFT

Far Cry 2

It's the malaria-crazed vomiting that we're anticipating, especially given the game's convincing portrayal of the player character's head and body movements.
360 PC PS3 UBISOFT

Metal Gear Solid 4

Revisiting the original reminded us how spellbinding Kojima's madcap saga can be, and the marriage with PS3 will surely see a special send-off for Snake. But which one?
PS3 KONAMI

Novelty value

Have we kicked our addiction to the new?

Having suffered the deluge of games selling themselves on a checklist of so-called 'next gen' features, videogames are finally sobering up and using the power of new platforms where it's really needed – and sometimes not at all

Not that we're ungrateful for increased draw distances or the ability to cram more enemies on screen, but it has to be said that such features often merely signpost technology rather than justify it. The progress towards a more discerning selection and exploitation of technology has been slow, but there are developers who have approached the current generation thinking of gameplay impact rather than the potential for saleable but superficial sheen.

Test Drive Unlimited was one of the first to innovatively combine the capabilities and connectivity of modern consoles, and with *Alone In The Dark* Eden Studios promises to bring an open world to bear on the survival horror genre, as well as cleverly exploiting the ability to model complex systems, with fire, physics and free-roaming AI that will follow sounds and smells in order to track you down. An *Alone In The Dark* for PS2 and Wii is being developed in parallel by Hydravision, and the features it shares with Eden's version will be an indicator of how successfully the potential of high-powered consoles is being mined.

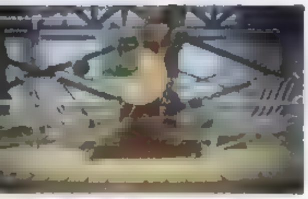
But not all games need to do this. In this issue we look at several that have not deviated from the gameplay formula that made them a success on the last generation. Is Lara Croft sticking her head in the sand and hoping that a mixture of nostalgia and brand recognition will conceal the fact she has been surpassed? Or is it simply that the obsession with novelty, still propelling current-generation sales, has finally worn off? Perhaps, after being momentarily wowed by improved physics and ever-expanding open worlds, we are ready to admit that a game concept built around PS2 is not necessarily inferior because it doesn't attempt to simulate the realistic spread of fire. Backing this up is *Disgaea 3*, which does nothing drastic with its art style or gameplay despite arriving on PS3.

The Lego titles featured this month similarly avoid gameplay that is exclusive to the current generation – but, admittedly, this may be for a slightly different reason, since it ensures scalability for the games' omniplatform releases. For all the validity that last-gen mechanics may still have, there remains the fact of Lego's astronomical sales and the applicable adage: if you're number one, why try harder?

FORMAT **PS3**
PUBLISHER **SCEE**
DEVELOPER **MEDIA MOLECULE**
ORIGIN **UK**
RELEASE **AUTUMN**
PREVIOUSLY IN **E174**

LittleBigPlanet

This article was written by copying a few words and stamping them over and over. The pictures are held on with drawing pins



You could, after carefully building this five-pronged wheel, blow it up, shrink it down, or simply copy and paste it all over the level in a matter of seconds

LittleBigPlanet is now fundamentally complete, in pre-alpha bug-testing and due for a closed beta trial in early summer for some final tweaking. After that, the real work begins – ours. That might seem glib, even a little like an advertising line (something similar will doubtless market the title) but it's fundamental to any assessment of the game that hopes to play bridesmaid to the next level of user-generated content on home consoles. In fact, previewing *LBP* might be considered an exercise in futility – it's a game that can only be accurately assessed months (if not years) after release, rather than months before completion.

But that would be rather too precious. What can be seen of *LBP* is the structure being created to contain and inform this experimentation, and it looks to be as comprehensive as anything yet seen in a console title. The Pop-It menu essentially allows you to cut, paste and resize at will with any shape you choose or create, and can be accessed at any time in the game (barring certain sections of the 'story' levels where it would obviously render the challenge impotent). This makes building what looks like a relatively complex object very simple indeed – the game's producer has a party piece of a tree that can be built in around a minute by simply copying, resizing and stamping a basic shape over and over, before attaching leaves with drawing pins. The flexibility in manipulating, resizing and rotating the basic building bricks seems limitless, and the accessibility of the interface hides the depth behind a sheen of simplicity.

> The flexibility in manipulating, resizing and rotating the basic building bricks seems limitless, and the accessible interface hides the depth behind a sheen of simplicity

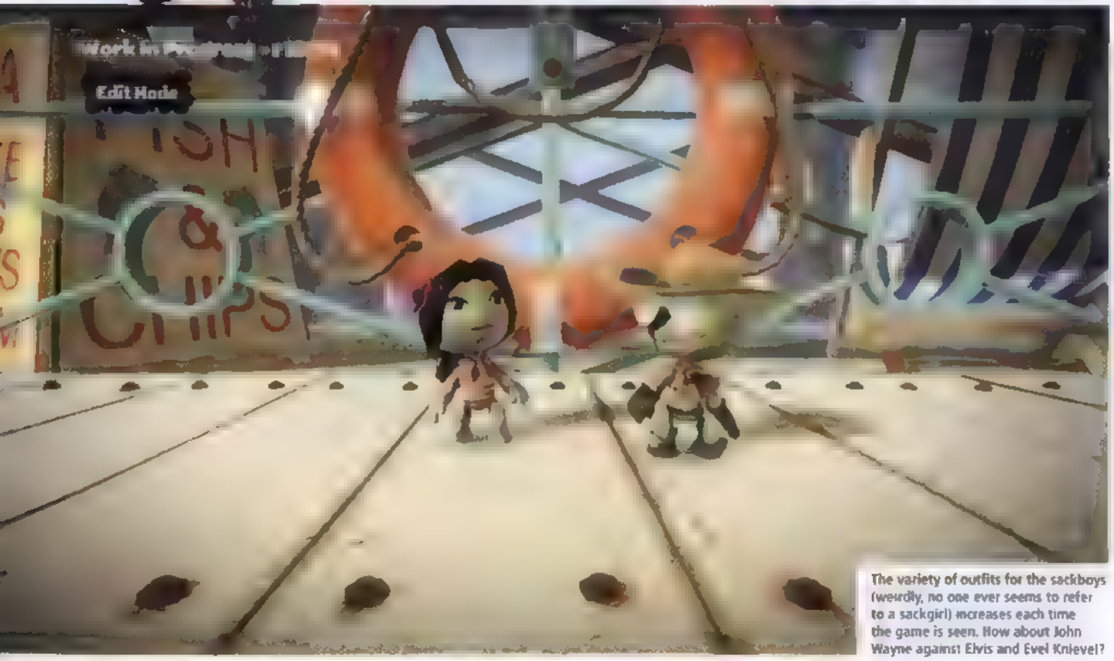
The more conventional side of the game is the 'LittleBigStory', with a basic narrative connecting over 50 levels to be played through with one to four players. Those players can be any mix of local and PSN sackboys, and each level only begins when each member is at the starting gate – it seems clear that when the fundamentals are mastered, *LittleBigPlanet*'s basic levels put the emphasis on players racing each other to fluff (the basic pick-up for content creation in LittleBigStory) and to the next challenge. The levels also now incorporate hazards that can 'kill' your sackboy, but death within the game is countered heavily by frequent respawn doors – it's rare for all four players to fail at a single obstacle, so dying is more of a temporary inconvenience than an endpoint.

A new level was shown off at the recent CES, with an Indian theme running throughout, manifested most obviously in an *LBP* version of Ganesh and some bizarre sitar music. The former is as much part of the level's architecture as it is the background, a recurring feature thus far. And although everything is made out of substances with particular properties, the developers are keen to emphasise that objects are not necessarily made out of what you'd expect – a tree is as likely to be sponge as it is wood.

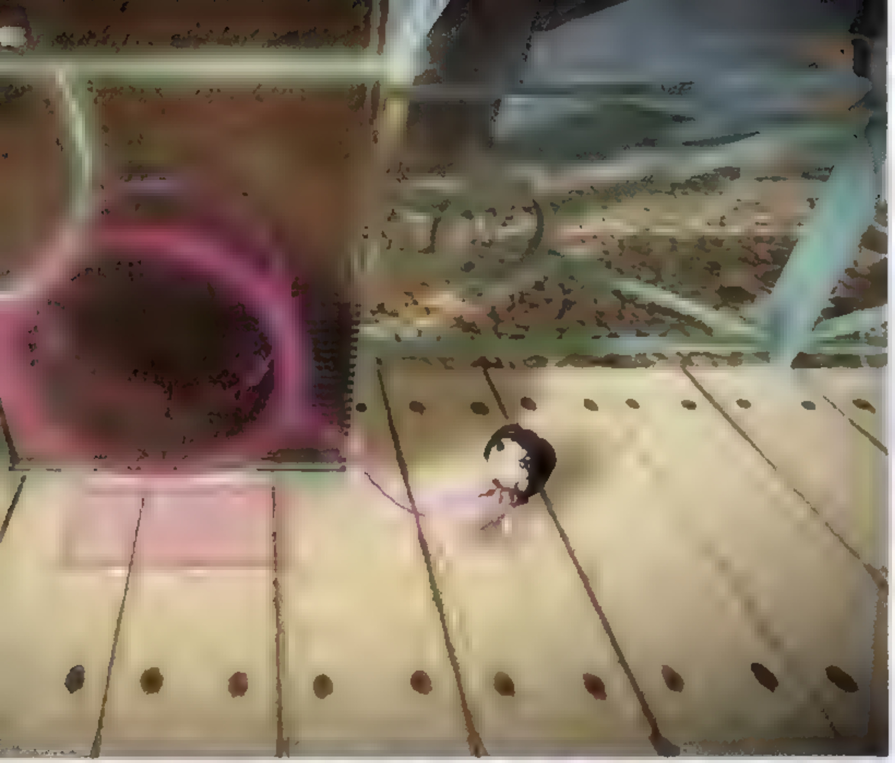
These story levels also help fully unlock *LBP*'s content creation. "All the time you're playing through this mode you're earning stuff to help you create," says **Pete Smith**, *LBP*'s producer. "So at the start you might have all of the tools but only have sponge and wood and brick in terms of properties you can imbue objects with – then after the first level you might get glass, because we really want to channel people towards the creation side and experimenting."

The philosophy behind the content creation has stayed pure. *LBP* isn't about a huge set of complex tools that each have a niche purpose – it's about really basic tools that can be combined to form complicated objects. Players can make complex dynamic objects from the shared and simple starting items, and others can then take those objects and build on them. "We're not going to limit people," says Smith. "We're providing basic properties to combine, and the possibilities are pretty limitless. That's not to say there

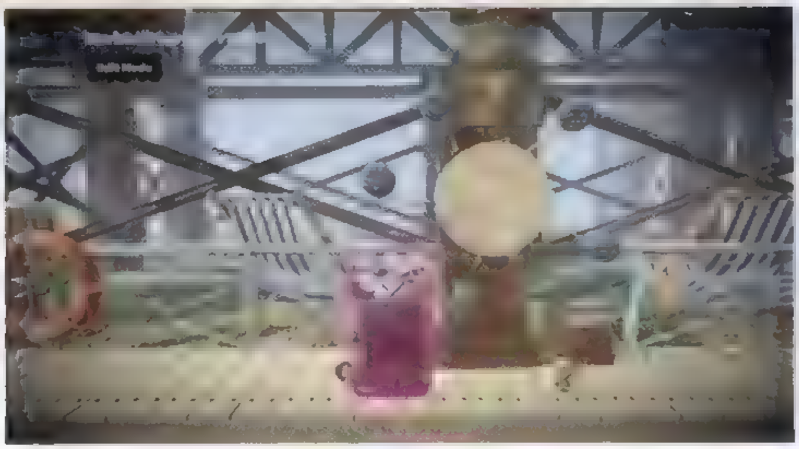
Work in Progress
Edit Mode



The variety of outfits for the sackboys (weirdly, no one ever seems to refer to a sackgirl) increases each time the game is seen. How about John Wayne against Elvis and Evel Knievel?



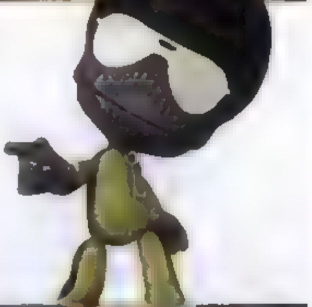
All of the game's environments have the chunky textures unique to *LBP*: apparently it was originally concepted as 'like a puppet theatre without the strings' – puppets and fish and chips by the seaside. It's just like being ten again



won't be quite a few basic tools to play with, and more as they're needed by the community, but it's amazing what people can create with just a cog and a piston." That emphasis on the community will also dictate the direction of *LBP*'s DLC. "We'll be feeding the community our own content just as they supply it themselves – but we'll be able to create specific stuff," explains Smith. "The pistons and pulleys, for example, are the kind of thing only we can provide, and based on feedback from the community we can look at what they want and hopefully provide it."

Beyond that, the tools exist to simply create things without a specific purpose – there is no need for it to have an in-game function or be part of an obstacle course. "I don't believe that everyone who's creative will, or will want to, build a level," adds Smith. "They may just want to make a cool thing, and that's great." And in terms of distributing these items, you can simply create a room for people to enter and pick up the item. Most excitingly, Media Molecule anticipates levels that act as hubs and simply point people in the direction of the best user-created content. Imagine a room with five doors, each one with a little screenshot and description of what's through it. Those hubs will then become highly rated themselves and people will gain a reputation as good 'sifters', and become as important for the community as the creators themselves.

LBP has always looked like knockabout fun. But the clearer the structure being built around it becomes, and the commitment of Media Molecule and SCE to redefining how a console can work with user-generated content grows, the more obvious it is that *LBP* has the potential to become something remarkable. At the very least, *LBP* will be a novelty that's continually freshened. At its very best, it could set a new standard for involving a community in a game – and see an overdue return for Sony to the frontlines of video game innovation.



Pop-It can pop out almost anywhere in the game and be moved around, with either the interface or the object used from it remaining attached to the character with a luminous line of thread, making it easy to distinguish who's doing what in the multiplayer building frenzies

[illegible] you set me alight

The sackboys have brilliantly expressive faces that can cycle through four basic emotions and then gradations within those limits – as well as wave their arms and slap each other around. When playing online, these expressions have obvious applications but *LBP* – as ever – is going just that little step further. "We are planning to lip-synch the voice chat in the game," says Smith. It's thrown out there as just another incidental detail about the game, but it serves to showcase the imaginations behind the game. "We may even put in some voice filters and stuff like that," he goes on. "That's something which may not make it in at launch, but that's the kind of stuff that will be fed in over time. We want to keep people constantly aware of the game and interested."

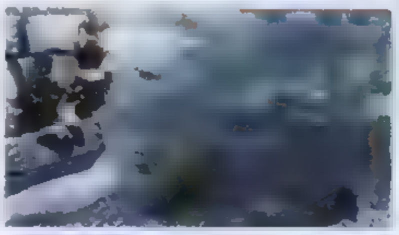
FORMAT **360, DS, PC, PS2, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER **CRYSTAL DYNAMICS**
ORIGIN **US**
RELEASE **LATE 2008**

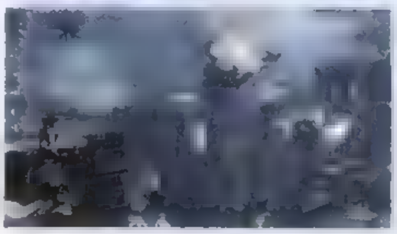
Tomb Raider: Underworld

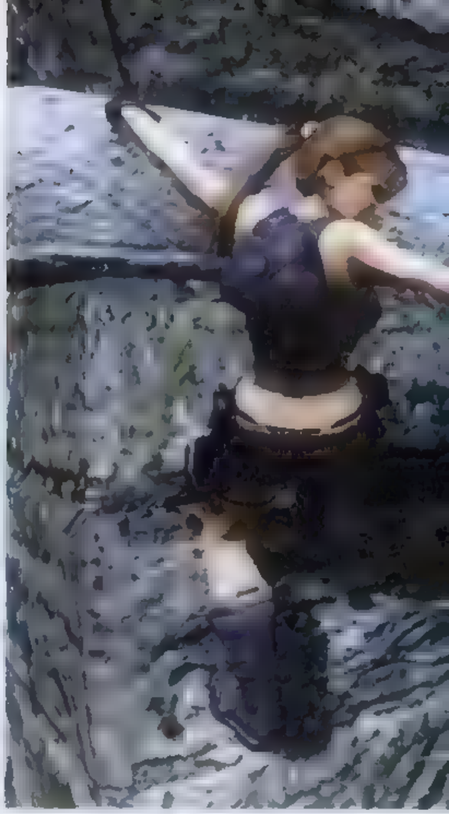
Crystal Dynamics buys Lara Croft a one-way ticket to hell and back, in another slick revamp

With parent company SCi experiencing a turbulent January of failed takeover bids, rollercoaster share prices and changes at the top, you can forgive Eidos for wanting to seek out a little stability amid the chaos. So it was that members of the UK press were invited to get their first glimpse of the next *Tomb Raider* – the one and only guaranteed earner on the company's slate – in a basement cinema in the West End in the middle of the month. What was shown was much like Lara herself: slender but sturdy, comely but practical. Although based on a new engine, *Tomb Raider Underworld* seems to stick firmly to the series' mantra since its rebirth at the hands of Crystal Dynamics with 2006's *Legend*: do the basics, and do them well. So far, so reassuring.

Lara's contextual melee attack will alter according to the situation and what she's holding. Mexico's black panthers seem a traditional *Tomb Raider* hazard, but the poachers who hunt them will also feature







> Her clean, slightly cartooned features are animated and expressive, her figure is trim and more plausible than it has been and, in motion, she is breathtaking

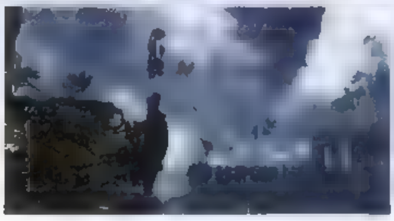
Eidos is naturally seeking to maximise the return on its investment with versions of the game for PS2, Wii and DS, but *Underworld's* development is being led on more powerful hardware, a series first for this generation. Although *Legend* and *Anniversary* scaled up well, the difference in the new engine demoed on 360 – is immediately apparent. *Underworld* is a handsome beast.

It may not boast the eye-watering detail and sharpness of new rival *Uncharted*, but exquisite lighting, weather and atmospheric effects, and some sensationally fluid animation – based, in a surprising first for *Tomb Raider*, on motion capture – give it a much more natural look. Lara was shown exploring a Mayan temple in the Mexican jungle during a downpour. The rain ran convincingly off every surface, soaked her clothes and collected in muddied pools. Watery sunlight broke from behind clouds and faded again as their shadows passed over the field of play. Gentle highlights picked out the tones of surrounding vegetation or stone in reflected light, and HDR effects were used sparingly and with finesse. Subtlety and restraint aren't words you use often when it comes to videogame lighting and colour, and it's a pleasure to be able to apply them here.

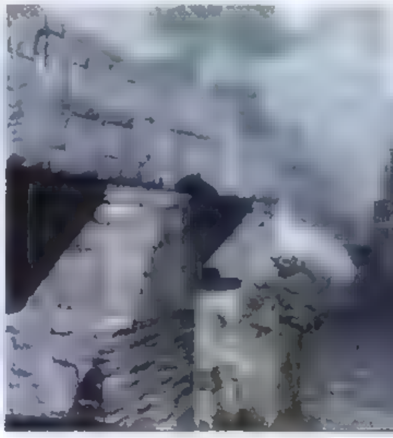
The appearance of Lara herself is of more than cosmetic importance, though. Still the definitive icon of the modern videogame age, Toby Gard's creation needs to anchor the screen with charisma, grace, dynamism and sex appeal, and her new incarnation is more than up to the task. Her clean, slightly cartooned features are animated and expressive, her figure is trim and more plausible than it has been, and although mud sticking to her legs and washing off in the rain has a slightly seedy air to it, it does set her satisfyingly in the world. More importantly, in motion, she is breathtaking.

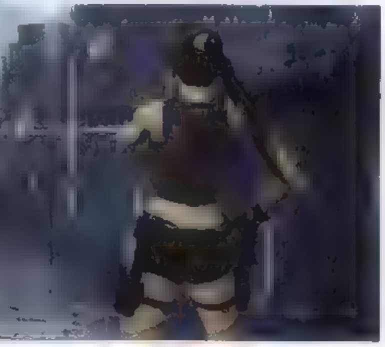
The changes to her move list are modest but effective, and beautifully animated. A new, powerful sprint animation allows her to cross the game's slightly more open environments at a fair old lick, and a wall-kick adds further intricacy to the expected

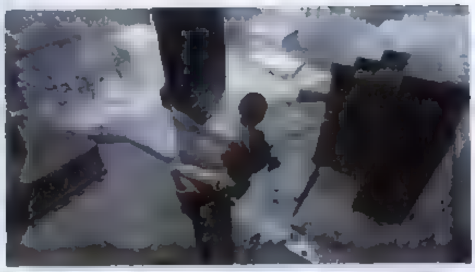
It will be far from the first time Lara Croft has taken to two wheels, but with *Underworld's* motorcycle, Eidos is promising a much more persistent and integrated ride than the vehicular interludes of *Tomb Raiders* past. The bike will be fairly liberally used to get around the larger environments, and its use will be built into certain puzzles and navigation challenges: in the demo we saw, Lara had to use it to reach a timed gate in time. A few extra tricks and moves have yet to be revealed, and, we hope, some adjustments to the model: the aggressive styling of the fat-wheeled, futuristic hog we saw seemed more in keeping with *No More Heroes*.

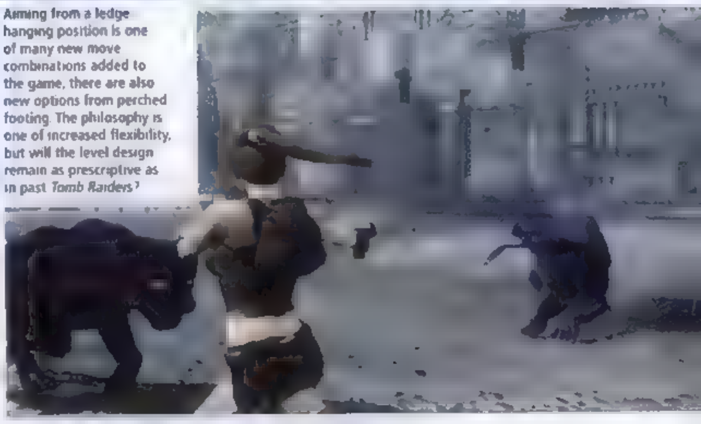


The grappling hook and its line will now interact physically with the environment, and can be used to solve puzzles – such as snagging it on a stone block to topple it (below). Many of *Underworld's* puzzles are resolved with physics events rather than scripts









Aiming from a ledge hanging position is one of many new move combinations added to the game; there are also new options from perched footing. The philosophy is one of increased flexibility, but will the level design remain as prescriptive as in past *Tomb Raiders*?

flowing assault courses. Both, however, are eclipsed by free climbing: although an unremarkable feature in itself, and restricted to fairly obviously signposted surfaces, the nimble, graceful movement and strong sense of physical connection, of strength and athleticism, are classic *Tomb Raider*.

Like *Legend* and *Anniversary*, *Underworld* is all about flexibility and fluidity. A dual lock-on for Lara's twin pistols is especially useful when fighting circling black panthers, or the small spiders that can climb and jump from vertical surfaces. She can scavenge items from the environment for contextual melee attacks, wielding one in one hand and a gun in the other, and the pole she picked up in the demo could also be used to fit into slots in the temple walls to create new paths. All of this is accomplished with transparent ease, and not the slightest join is visible in the animation routines.

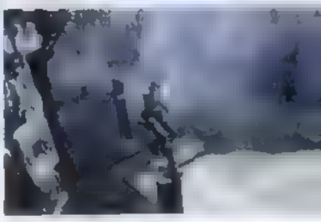
As impressive as all this is, the brief section of the game we saw was by-the-numbers *Tomb Raider*: shoot wild animals, clamber, topple block, fit relic in slot, open rumbling slabs of stone. It's comforting, sure, but not all that exciting. A chat with the producers suggested some mild, if welcome changes to the well-worn template. Eidos says the game, while remaining level-based and hardly open-world, will feature more open areas, a less linear structure and overarching puzzles whose components can be completed in any order (we assume a certain amount of *Metroid*-style backtracking exploration will go with them). We're told that button-prompted cinematic events, rather intrusive in the last two games, will be present, but better integrated.

What's of most significance, of course, is what Eidos isn't showing yet. The climax of the demo was Lara opening the supposed gates to the Mayan underworld itself. The suggestion – cautiously tiptoed around by the producers and heavily reinforced by the title – is that a substantial chunk of the game will take place in overtly mythical, fantastical locations, providing a sharp contrast with the crumbling, overgrown masonry above.

It's an appealing but dangerous prospect. Tonal shifts like these are hard to pull off at the best of times, never mind in the ninth instalment of a beloved series with strong traditions. From the little we've seen so far, though, Crystal Dynamics is handling *Underworld* with an uncommonly sure foot and light touch. Who knows, if it can guide Lara smoothly down into hell, it might just be able to drag SCi out of it.

Underworld's beauty is scarcely evident in these screenshots, as is so often the case; you need to see this game – its heroine, mostly – moving to appreciate it. The gorgeous lighting is evident above, however

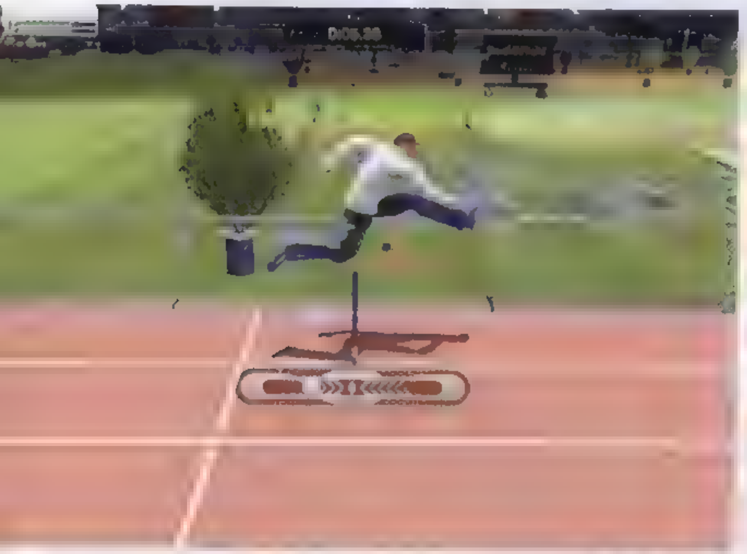
Some poles (above) can be attached to sockets in order to provide new navigation and climbing options, but you obviously can't take them with you, so it will take some smart design for this to be more than a gimmick



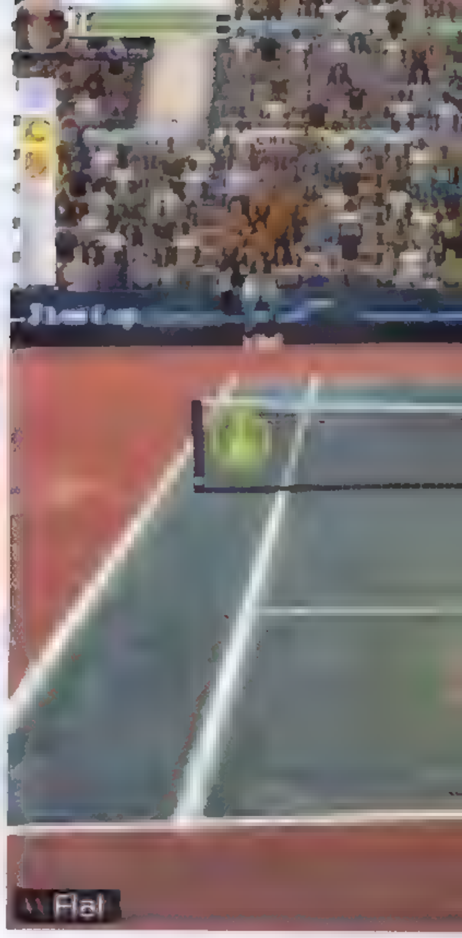
FORMAT PC
PUBLISHER EMPIRE OF SPORTS
DEVELOPER F4
ORIGIN FRANCE
RELEASE 2008

Empire Of Sports

Is F4's sports MMO a disposable curio or the future of gaming? Or could it be both?



F4 scorns the strict server populations of *WOW* and the like, so *Empire Of Sports* will be a single, global community with instanced sports, and switchable 'channels' that can be used to find friends for socialising



As a proposition, *Empire Of Sports* is eyebrow-raising, to say the least: a sports-themed, PC-only MMORPG, launching with seven distinct sports disciplines (tennis, basketball, football, bobsleigh, track and field, skiing and gym training), developed in two short years by an inexperienced studio – Parisian newcomer F4 – with investment, not from within the videogame industry, but from a Swiss sports marketing company, Infront Sports & Media. It will be self-published, and distributed exclusively online as a free download, with a payment method still to be decided (either a modest subscription or micropayments, or some combination of the two). It's in private beta testing already, but the vital team sports are far from ready; it's due for release in Europe 'early' this year, with Asia to follow – Giant Interactive Group, China's third-largest online game operator, recently signed it – but there are no plans to launch in the US.

It looks dangerously sketchy on paper and the game is not universally convincing on the screen either. But there is more than a little method to F4 and Infront's apparent madness. As medium-to-long-term plans for the game are explained to us at F4's offices in central Paris, it becomes clear that *Empire Of Sports* is one of few western MMOs that's a credible proposition for both the massmarket and the booming Asian scene, and that it has an intriguing innovative approach to the meeting points of real and virtual worlds.

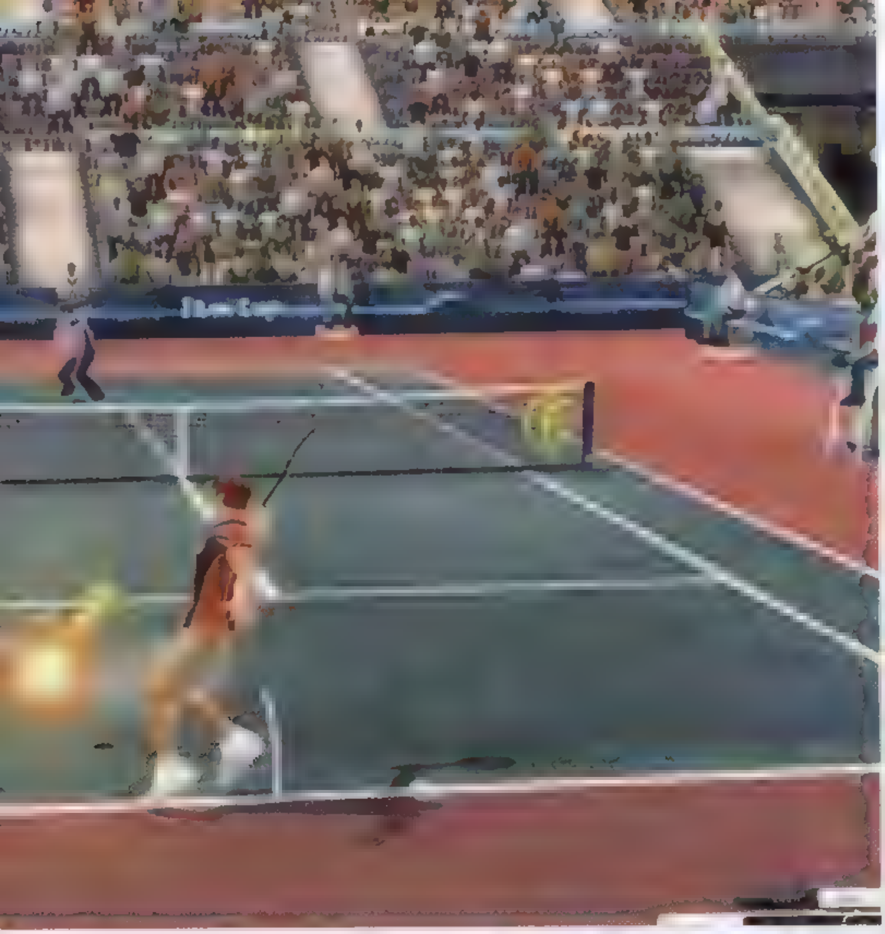
> Empire Of Sports is a credible proposition for both the mass market and the Asian scene, and has an innovative approach to the meeting points of real and virtual worlds

Empire Of Sports is an unusual mix: persistent avatars with RPG-style character and gear progression meet in a kitsch social space and participate in simple, arcade-inflected sports, rhythm-action training minigames and genuine team sports, scaling up to five-on-five basketball and full football 11s. A single avatar can play any and all sports, but its skills and physique will specialise according to its competition, training and even nutritional regime. Some of the skills gained will be of general use – aiming, balance, endurance – while some will be specific to one sport, or even one style or playing position.

The sports naturally have a strong element of player skill, meaning the gap between low- and high-level characters will be much narrower than the usual yawning gulf. Lead designer **Vincent Vimont** explains that each sport is being carefully balanced across four factors – player skill, avatar training, equipment and the strategic selection of 'tricks' (the game's talents or spells, in MMO parlance: they can be active moves or passive attribute buffs, and must be narrowed down to a selection of six or eight for each match). It's a clever template that, if it works, will give players several routes to success: raw playing skill, tactical planning, the investment of time in the training grind or of money in paid-for equipment or skills.

Tennis is the most polished of the sports at present, so F4 shows it first; and it is

Seasoned MMO players will be delighted to learn that F4 is including an in-game internet browser in *Empire Of Sports*

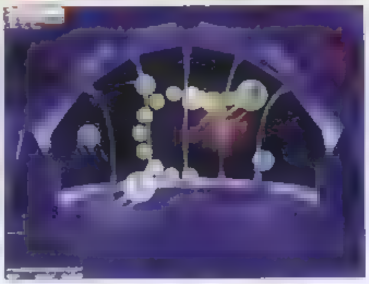


They aren't being shown yet, but players will be able to buy apartments for their avatars and use them as spaces for socialising and showing off, as well as spectating on matches via their TVs. Customisation options will include hairdressers from the off – something *WOW* fans are still waiting for

frankly a revelation, its mouse-and-keyboard controls (WASD to move, mouse to aim, with accuracy depending on shot power, character skill and fatigue) promoting tactically deep and exciting rallies much more easily than traditional stick-and-button schemes. It also serves as an interesting example for the application of *Empire Of Sports'* patented metabolism engine, which causes characters to tire out as they exert themselves; for the first time, it really will be possible to exhaust your opponent with to-and-fro baseline rallies, and force errors. Energy can be replenished with food during breaks and between events, naturally, with superior products (from the organic health-food shop we spot, for example) giving better results.

Skiing, which can be played alone or in simultaneous downhill sprints, is an extremely basic racing game that's clearly aimed at the most casual of players. Track and field events – and the training machines in the gym – mix nostalgic frantic button mashing with more modern prompts aimed at simulating rhythm, timing and balance; they seem a little halting and woolly by comparison with their arcade forebears. Bobsleigh blends these styles of play in another simple game, but one that serves as a gateway to co-operative play that's a little less daunting than the team sports.

It's worrying that we're not allowed hands-on time with basketball or football, as these are so central to *Empire Of Sports'* unique appeal. Effectively, they're the game's equivalent of traditional MMORPG raiding. F4 hopes that clubs (guilds) will build around them, with coaches who will organise teams and take an active role in tactics and player selection. Initially they will be player-coaches, but a separate tactical management role is planned down the line. Football clearly needs a lot of work, although basketball seems brisk enough, and the adoption of the excellent team control scheme for both is definitely an encouraging sign.



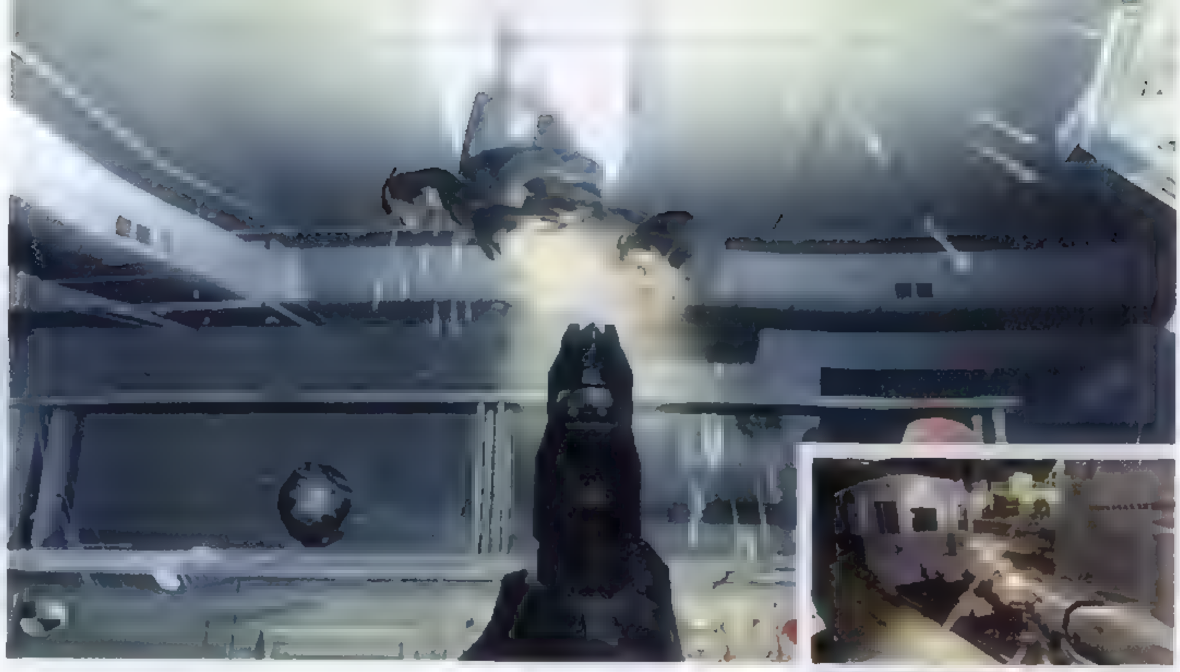
European players can begin the game in the UK, France, Germany or the catch-all Sportopia, and will land in a cheesy capital city with familiar landmarks. F4 suggests that travel between cities will be sponsored by an airline

However, it's where clubs depart from traditional guilds that really shows the difference in thinking between *Empire Of Sports* and a standard MMO. F4 is inviting real sporting teams – Arsenal, for example – to start clubs in the game, both as interactive fan sites and fully operational virtual teams. Solo players can get missions (quests) from their idols to earn licensed gear (virtual or even real), while the best competitive players can aspire to represent their beloved teams in *Empire Of Sports'* competitions and leagues, which, again, given Infront's connections, could quite easily be licensed.

Factor in online competitions coinciding with real-world events – the Beijing Olympics being first – and untold opportunities for unobtrusive, targeted in-game advertising, and it only takes a little imagination to see that *Empire Of Sports* has the potential to be the holy grail of the MMO business, where gaming and real-world commercial concerns meet. To get there, though, it will need to attract and retain players, and to do that it will need the bread-and-butter gameplay and character progression to prove compelling over long periods of time. As it stands that's in serious doubt for all but the excellent tennis, but *Empire Of Sports* has it all to play for.

Lag waiving

The biggest problem with engineering a massively multiplayer online sports game is lag, but as Vimont explains, *Empire Of Sports'* basis in RPG stats is a huge help to F4, allowing the studio to design its way out of the problem to some extent. "In most sports games, when you intercept a ball it's automatic – players go close to the ball and it sticks to their shoes. When you have 20 players on a football field and everyone's close to the ball you cannot detect through the network who catches it. If you want to steal the ball you have to have a good internet connection, and that's not the right thing to do, of course. So we have rules, very close to RPGs, about techniques – the interception technique is an RPG attribute that will lead the server to decide who gets the ball. We have some gameplay around tricks and manual interceptions, so you decide when you want to catch the ball."



Full of concrete, right angles and harsh light, Monolith's environments are brutally urban. Fans of *FEAR* and *Condemned* will know, however, not to take things at face value. Unobtrusive scenery is a vital companion to this game's crafty AI and military tactics

Project Origin

Monolith sets out to prove you have nothing to fear but FEAR itself

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Released in the aftermath of The Matrix and The Ring, *FEAR* was a perfectly metered dose of east-meets-west gunplay with a precise notion of what that entailed. That people cared enough to make two expansion packs and a sequel, however, the former bearing the name but developed by imposters, the latter made by Monolith yet named by an internet competition, alludes to something more. With AI that wrapped mischievously around packing yards, warehouses and office cubicles, yelling at itself contextual orders and reports, *FEAR* was also one of the smartest shooters ever made.

Project Origin, a name picked over candidates as fan-tacular as *Carnival Of Graveyards* and *Deathscapade*, could be read as a bad omen. The roots, after all, are not where a *FEAR* sequel should obviously lead, especially given the ample exposure of said roots last time. Little girls in dire need of haircuts are as passé as tourist-torturing rednecks: do we really want to delve deeper into that mythology?

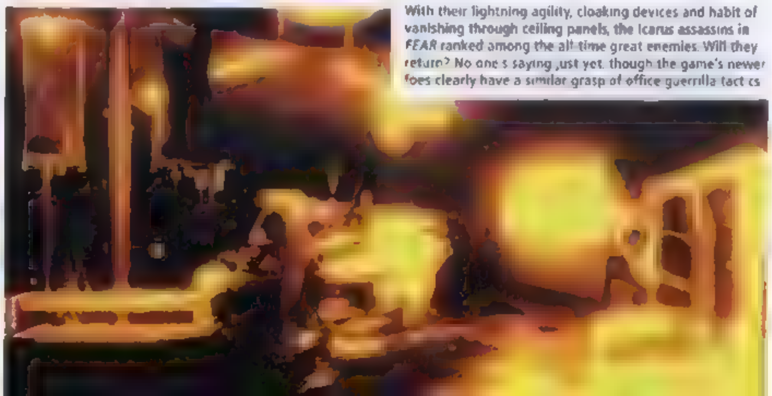
It seems we're going to have to because Alma, the last game's enfant-terrible, is at it again. While not a prequel – its beginning overlaps *FEAR*'s explosive climax – *Origin* nonetheless focuses on Alma's motives, history, and the storm that revolves around her. But you can stop worrying. Whatever you might think of its themes and plot, Monolith's sequel seems no less incisive a shooter, and one with the resolve to avoid obvious pitfalls like squad-based combat.

Investigating the carnage of *FEAR*, Delta operative Michael Becket faces more tactical open combat than met his anonymous predecessor. *Origin* fancies itself as less of a cineaste, and is delving fully into its potential as a full-bore, near-future shootout, albeit with the same splendid bullet-time abilities as before. More or less all of the original enemies and visuals have been dropped in favour of smarter, more capable ones, the mechs, particularly, powered up to exploit the larger environments. The co-operative powers of allied NPCs have also evolved beyond moving the occasional piece of furniture, but a "go there" "on my way, sir" experience this is not.

Paxton Fettel fans will be saddened to hear of his absence, though *Origin* promises a much wider range of villains and freaks. Hero Michael Becket will develop a similar 'connection' with Alma as seen in the first game

The mention of sandbox combat in which AI and player improvise tactics smacks deliciously of *Stalker*, and the enemies here, ranging from mangled hospital patients to armoured soldiers, force you to exploit a greatly enhanced, newly procedural cover system. That doesn't preclude more fanciful weapons: the nailgun – more a galvanised stake-gun – once again turning enemies into ornamental wall hangings.

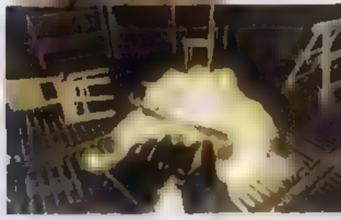
Monolith believes its direction with *Origin* to have shifted thanks to the turmoil of bickering over rights and names, but the game suggests little of the sort. And nothing could be more reassuring. The notion of a *FEAR* that sticks to its guns while making them smarter and more powerful is tantalising, to say the least, and its arrival on both console and PC should avoid the first game's teething troubles, which saw its technical requirements hit levels not seen elsewhere for two years.



With their lightning agility, cloaking devices and habit of vanishing through ceiling panels, the Icarus assassins in *FEAR* ranked among the all-time great enemies. Will they return? No one's saying just yet, though the game's newer foes clearly have a similar grasp of office guerrilla tactics

Monolith's legal battle with Vivendi over rights to the original *FEAR* has been as bloody as a slow-motion grenade blast. As a result, Vivendi retains ownership of its name, and is legally allowed to create expansion packs that recycle its assets. Monolith, meanwhile, owns all of its content, fiction and characters, hence the zeal of *Project Origin*. Rumours persist of a Vivendi-published titular sequel, though the obliged departure from the first game would surely make the brand almost entirely irrelevant. Given the awful port that recently 'graced' PS3, together with lethargic expansion packs *Extraction Point* and *Perseus Mandate*, it barely seems a brand worth keeping.

Players can explore in either first or thirdperson, but aiming and shooting always takes place in firstperson. It's efficiently designed, but the transition between the two views, in its current state, isn't as smooth as it could be



Alone In The Dark

Except for the terrifying monsters and zombies, and all the other people, that is

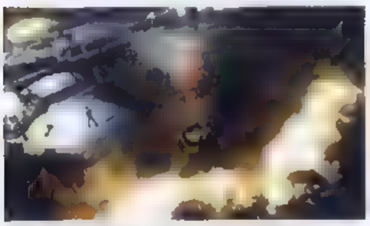
FORMAT **360, PC, PS2, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER **ATARI**
DEVELOPER **EDEN STUDIOS**
ORIGIN **FRANCE**
RELEASE **MAY (PS3 TBC)**
PREVIOUSLY IN **E163, E181**

When last seen, Eden Studios' New York horror game seemed little more than a set of impressive tech demos, but from an extensive look at various scenarios from its most recent builds, *Alone In The Dark* is looking a lot more like a game.

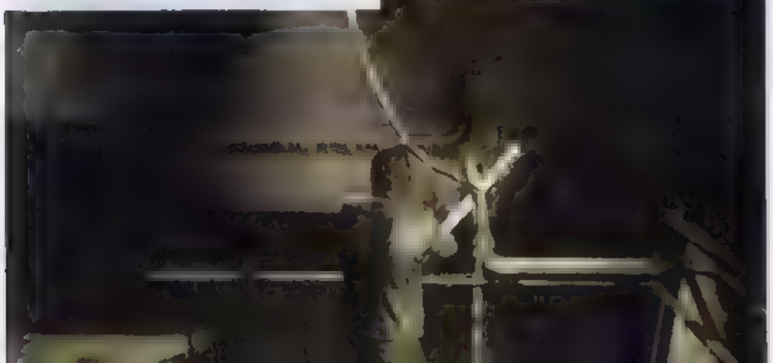
It's certainly heavily story led, with Eden evidently having put much work into various narrative tricks. It has no distracting HUD – Carnby's body shows his injuries, and particularly heavy damage causes his eyesight to blur, requiring a click-in of a stick to clear. It's an interesting piece of design, even if it does force players to go blind at the moment they need their vision the most. It's used well during the opening sequence, however, in which Carnby wakes up, eyes glazed from being drugged or beaten, and requiring frequent presses to see what's going on.

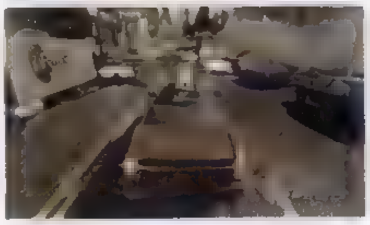
Much has also been invested in creating a credible world. Items, as seen before, can be used in rational ways – an aerosol combined with adhesive tape creates a sticky explosive or if sprayed at a fire, a small flamethrower. Puzzles have similar real-world, often physics-based, logic but the few we've seen were disappointingly unimaginative. Environments were littered with cables that electrified pools of water, requiring much turning of valves to drain them or locating of switches to turn the current off. One showed more potential, though, in which Carnby must use a pipe to carefully hook a cable out of the water.

More promisingly, many situations had multiple solutions. Locked doors, for instance, can be bludgeoned in with a fire extinguisher, burned down or shot through. One with a keypad offered two routes: working out the code or shooting the keypad to access a neat minigame involving connecting wires. Such freedom extends to combat, with environmental debris and combinations of items offering a broad toolset to play with. A major one is fire, which propagates naturally to offer a good weapon against the zombies that have to be taken out by burning.



We're hoping we'll see more of such naturalistic and intuitive puzzles as the one below, in which an electric cable must be hooked out of a pool of water with a pipe





Though much of what we saw was set in dank corridors and crumbling halls, one section sees a desperate attempt to escape from New York in a cab as the city is torn apart. Closely resembling a stage from *Stuntman*, it suggests that lonely wandering isn't all that's on offer

Though the storyline is linear, Central Park acts as a hub for the locations in which it takes place. It isn't yet clear how much free access Carnby has to it during the story, but it will be available as a freeplay option from the main menu. It features a scattering of vehicles, from groundsmen's caddies to sedans, and some monstrous denizens which are fast, agile and can use hearing and smell to hunt. Even without the final AI system implemented it's an unnerving place: a demonstration of how a car's petrol tank can be pierced, driven around and then blown up by lighting its trail of fuel is halted by a zombie which, having heard Carnby open the car door, has come to find him.

Some polishing is still required: final voice-acting is not yet inserted, nor music. Many graphic effects are rough, and Carnby tends to skate rather than walk on surfaces, particularly steps. But with, as this is being written, four months to go until launch, Eden has time to do it. There's certainly more here than the set of playthings we saw before, but the new question is what part its open world will play in it all.

Open season

Alone In The Dark's story is presented like a 24-style TV series, consisting of self-contained but sequential episodes that last between 45 minutes and an hour. What's more, players are given story recaps upon resuming saved games to ensure no one misses – or forgets – a thing. Players can even skip sections in which they get stuck to help ensure that everyone sees it through to its conclusion. Quite how this approach will integrate with the open-world aspect remains to be seen – it's certainly different to the way *Dead Rising* tried to tell a linear story in an open world

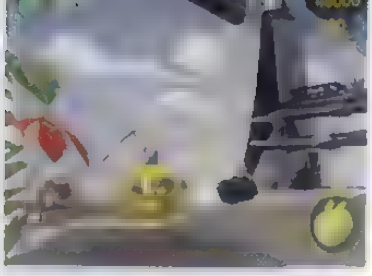
FORMAT **DS, WII**
PUBLISHER **THQ**
DEVELOPER **HELIXE (DS)**
BLUE TONGUE (WII)
ORIGIN **AUSTRALIA**
RELEASE **JUNE 27**

De Blob

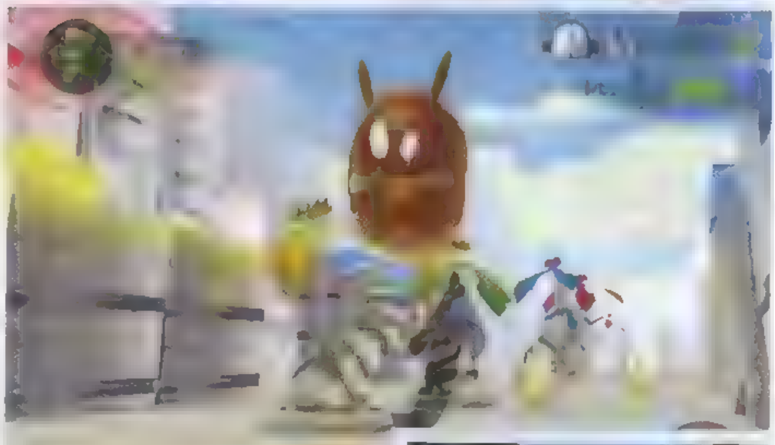
THQ splashes out to make the world a more colourful place

One of the more appealing Wii titles for 2008 looks to be *De Blob*, a quirky sandbox game built on the simple idea of colouring things in, and creating a fusion of colour and sound within its world. The game's setting, the city of Chroma, has been taken over by the fascist INKT corporation, and all colour has been outlawed. The locations are thus monochrome to begin with, sharp lines and pavements delineated in shades of grey and the odd black line. Blob begins each level as an opalescent outline, but by picking up the paint pots that are scattered around takes on their colour and gains a limited amount of gloop with which to begin re-painting the world.

This is, simply enough, achieved by touching objects – the locations are dense with buildings, benches, trees and lampposts to be splattered – and the main pleasure of the game is in the synaesthetic touches put in place around this central mechanic. Paint trails follow Blob's path, little splashy furrows of colour, while hitting any object results in a bright torrent moving over its structure in varied patterns, and as locations become more coloured and less monochrome the music begins to sync up. The audio is linked to actions, so each time paint hits a surface there's a small breakout of sound, the specific pitch and style of which is affected by the pattern of your paint (patterns can be changed with pick-ups distinct from the paint pots), with the default setting a funky jazz number.



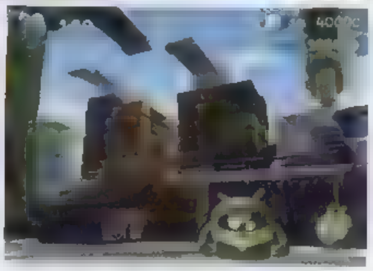
Although only the titular Blob has been shown in the screenshots released thus far, his comrades turn up at manholes dotted throughout the levels to set challenges and offer the odd bit of help in the war of colouration



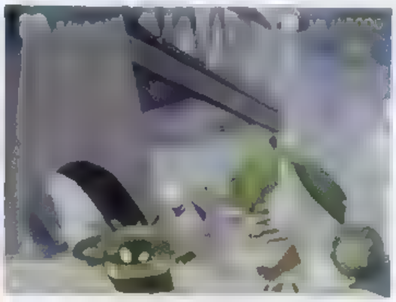
Although the game's environments are open and can be relatively expansive, progression is linear and based upon gaining points from challenges dotted around – these typically involve painting certain sections certain colours in a limited time, or taking on groups of enemies. Completion rewards you with a smart bomb, which has the visually rewarding effect of colouring huge sections surrounding their location. It's thus a relatively simple game in terms of structure – it's easy to see why Wii and DS are the chosen platforms – and its aesthetics are obviously informed by Blue Tongue's previous work on Nickelodeon properties (particularly Spongebob Squarepants).

There are several multiplayer modes in the current build, although only the relatively standard races were fully functional: these were a free-for-all in which a city district from any of the singleplayer stages starts off blank and four blobs try to cover it in their colour (and can paint over each others'), and a 'Blob Race' where only specific sections can be coloured at any one time, causing a rush when they change places. They're hectic and highly enjoyable, with the emphasis on easily understandable environments and objectives but there is some tactical depth. The importance of managing Blob's size, for example, becomes clear in these modes – less paint means he can move further and faster, but can't cover as many surfaces, whereas being full of paint slows him down and can lead to becoming stuck in openings and shortcuts that are now too small.

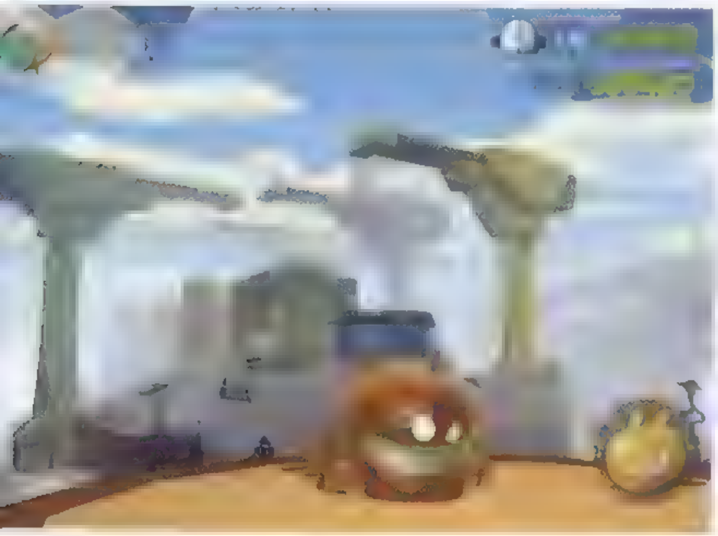
De Blob looks fresh, and although several months away from completion has a core idea that works extremely well. The fluidity of the visual and aural effects is accomplished, and the game could be a sleeper hit when it's released in the summer – and if nothing else, being loud and bright and messy in the name of communism (part of the game's appealing skewed humour) is a welcome break from the usual Duke Nukems of modern gaming.



The levels shown thus far have intricate interlocking structures dotted about, that lend themselves very well to the kind of speed-painting challenge the game favours

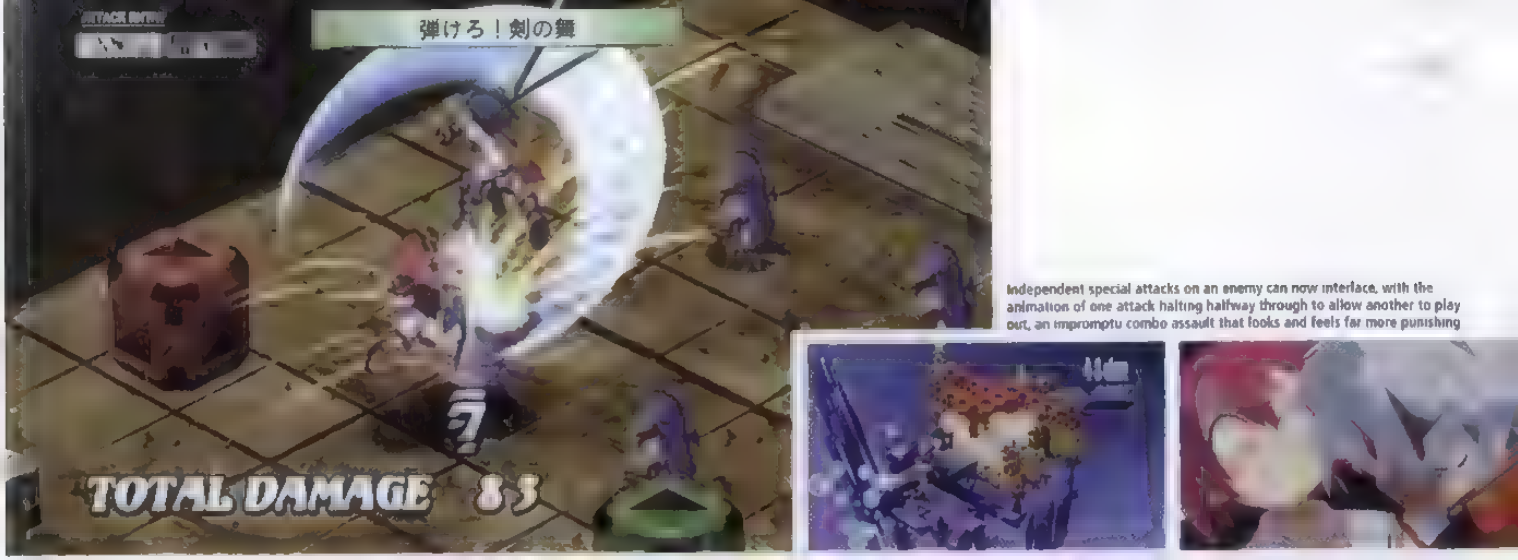


Draw distance isn't huge, but its limits are only noticeable at moments where levels stretch off – which are relatively rare



Welcome to Utrecht,
home of the Blob

De Blob was originally a free downloadable game created by students from the Utrecht School of Art and Utrecht University, which appropriately enough was called *The Blob*. Presumably the tweaked definite article is a form of tribute. The concept behind it even had some practical aims, looking to show how Utrecht's train station would look in ten years, as it was under construction. THQ now owns the IP, and none of the original creators are involved in this console version and it's worth emphasising the huge difference between the free game (which can be found at http://binnenstad.hku.nl) and this one. A lovely coda to the story is that Utrecht has adopted the Blob character as its mascot – life imitating videogames, something we all want more of.

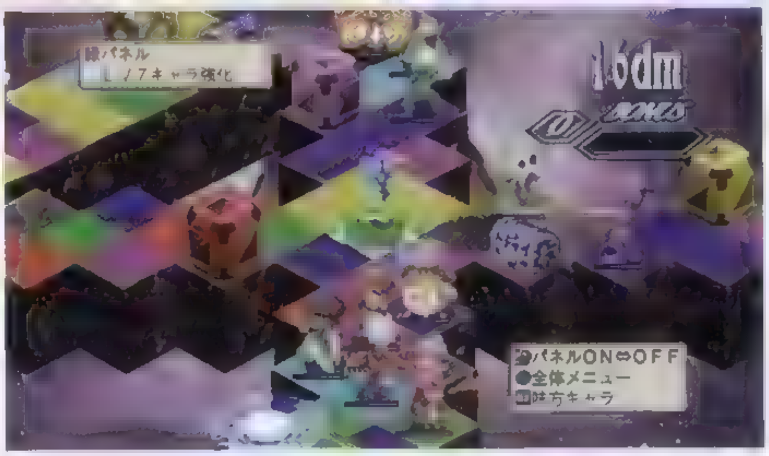


Independent special attacks on an enemy can now interlace, with the animation of one attack halting halfway through to allow another to play out, an impromptu combo assault that looks and feels far more punishing

Disgaea 3

The series that put the 'exp' into 'exponential' sticks to its sprites

It's one thing for sequels to stick to a prior formula using bells, whistles and baby steps to distract from the cynicism of exploitation. But when the series in question is built entirely upon a revision sheet's worth of equations, changing just the slightest of parameters can make worlds of difference. Nippon Ichi's first-principles reconstruction of the turn-based strategy RPG has served the studio well in the past four years, as its faith in the ability of players to savour complexity continues to pay off. Even after ten hours of play, however, it's difficult to contrast *Disgaea 3* with its previous iterations, and decide whether its changes come to be anything close to advances in the long run.



The right stick is now used to cycle through a character's equipment/status menu, and can also switch sometimes-giddying Geo Panel layouts on and off. Also, any attacks not 'used' in an executed queue of orders won't use up a character's turn

Monster-class characters will now transform into weapons for other allies to use, opening up powerful attacks and increasing the worth of a class that's incapable of throwing objects. Geostones have now become a prolific force in themselves, coloured cubes that can ignite their own chained explosions without the need for Geo Panels. Mana collected from defeated enemies isn't just used to create new characters, but also to purchase and upgrade special attacks, along with stat augmentations: it's a touch that makes skill expansion slower and more considered, at least to begin with.

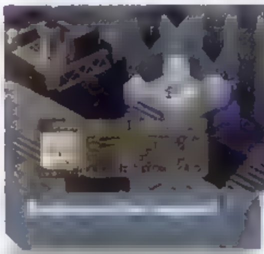
Special attacks now extend to tower situations – when you've more than one character stacked on top of one other – and towers are a cinch to organise, as adding more bodies is simply a case of getting them to walk onto the square hosting the stack. Incidental team up attacks feature much livelier and more varied animations, too. Marvellously, but oh so slightly, the ping of the menu cursor has been softened, a blessing for anyone who ever sat within earshot of a Nippon Ichi gamer. The hub music will still take permanent residence in your head after just a half hour's exposure, though: there's no change in that regard.

Previewing Nippon Ichi SRPGs can feel like a revision sheet in itself, a rundown of what you need to know, rather than how useful any of it will yet prove to be. One thing's for sure, though: while it's hardly surprising to see *Disgaea 3* sticking to its 2D decor, it's not as visually decadent as you'd expect from such a leap in hardware power. While the special attacks do shimmer and sparkle, and it's effusively colourful, HD makes little change to the aesthetic. But that technicolour floppy skin is just a fraction of the story: *Disgaea 3* is different. Whether it's different enough to stand above its forebears, however, is something that needs more time to be decided.

36
TOTAL DAMAGE 36

Given the increased furniture count, a more flexible camera system beyond the zoom and 45-degree pan is something you'll ache for even more. Just a few stages in, and environments and character placement already begins to feel befuddling in places

FORMAT **PS3**
PUBLISHER **NIPPON ICHI**
DEVELOPER **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN **JAPAN**
RELEASE **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK, US)**



The release of *Disgaea Afternoon Of Darkness* on PSP is, on the one hand, arguable reason for *Disgaea 3* not to appear on Sony's handheld. PS3 is the only current Sony hardware lacking a dedicated instalment of Nippon Ichi's star player, and it seems a proper home for a new presence. On the other hand, it only serves to show how glaring an omission Remote Play is, given how ideal an extension it would be. While criticising a game for being something that it's not is shaky ground, this is an oversight (see also the lack of online co-op in *Dynasty Warriors 6*, p96) that borders on the careless, given that it could be such an attractively thick layer of cake-icing for the fanbase

FORMAT **360, DS, PC, PSP, PS2, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER **TRAVELLER'S TALES**
ORIGIN **UK**
RELEASE **TBA**

Lego Batman

How to turn the dynamic duo into a Lego blockbuster? Dynamism, of course

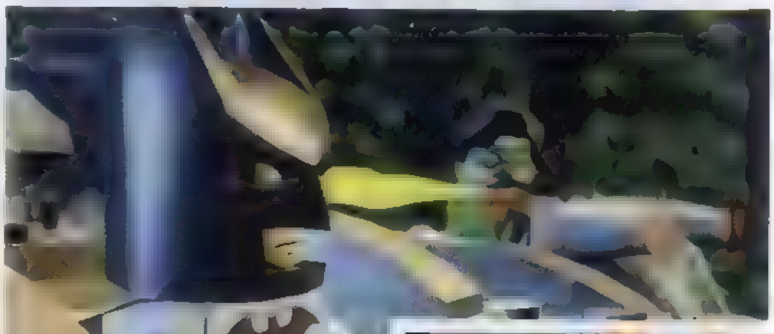
To a child, there's nothing at all complex about the Dark Knight. No Golden or Silver eras, no thin line between crusader and avenger, and no shudder at the mention of Batman & Robin. Likewise, there are no politics in Star Wars or Nazis in Indiana Jones. Just good guys, bad guys and utility belts.

The Lego Batman, then, who with his squat figure and chunky legs looks more like David Jason than Bruce Wayne, is as unblemished as a toy slid fresh from the box. His enemies live outside his head, on the studded streets of Lego Gotham. His only burden is the wealth of gadgets produced by Wayne Enterprises and Traveller's Tales.

Much of this, of course, was cast in plastic long before TT decided to cast it as a game. Enemies, of which this game has dozens, had already been reduced to colour schemes, stencil faces and jet-moulded fright-wigs. The Batcave was already stocked with more vehicles than existed in six Hollywood movies. Gotham was already chopped into a parade of iconic stages, from City Hall to Arkham Asylum.

The real challenge has been to tackle the innate differences between Bob Kane's ongoing, capricious series and the one-key matinee adventures of Star Wars and Indiana Jones. Without a commonly recognised timeline to adhere to, *Lego Batman* is a less parodic, more athletic adventure. The need to innovate has created not one but two parallel campaigns, one for the heroes, the other for the villains, each comprising a series-standard 18 levels. That means two hubs, the Batcave and Arkham, from which any dynamic or dastardly duo can be sprung into Freeplay mode.

That leisurely treasure hunt, unlocked by completing story missions, is joined by further Lego essentials: the stud-collecting bonus system, drop-in/drop-out co-op play, and vehicle-based minigames, all bound by TT's winning philosophy: what's fun for kids is fun for all. Already, the playthings here threaten to eclipse those of other *Legos*: the Joker packing his deadly hand-buzzer, the Penguin lobbing explosives, and Mr Freeze – you can figure that one out for yourself.

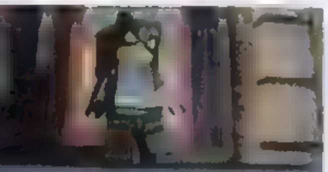


No one of the many generations of either Batman or Robin holds sway over their Lego forms – a decision previously made by Lego and inherited by Traveller's Tales

Batman and Robin, meanwhile, can swap between various suits armed with, among other things, magnetic boots for mounting walls and ceilings.

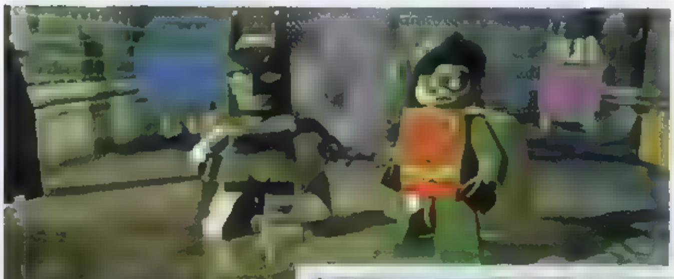
The kids, clearly, are in for a treat. TT's mission – and evident pleasure – for the rest of us is to remind us just how much we know and love about Batman, even if movies, TV shows, cartoons and comic books have dizzied our perception over time. Featured characters like Killer Croc will be lost on the vast majority, but this game, like *Lego Indiana Jones* (featured on p46), is built shrewdly around commonalities and functions. There's deduction, peril and no small degree of camp – global themes requiring no sly reference or wink to the camera.

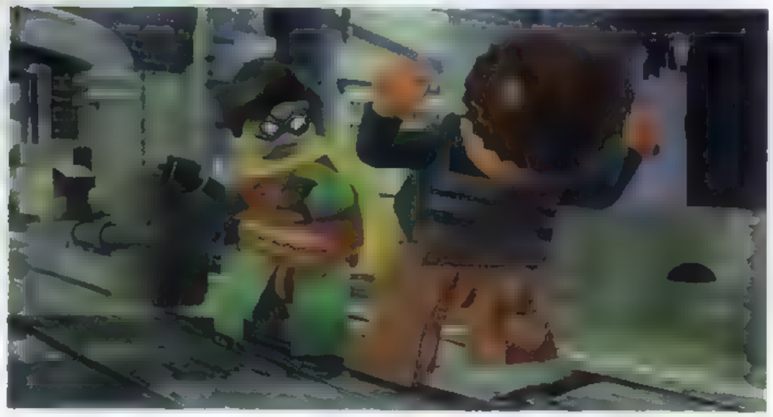
With every glance, *Lego Batman* goes from being the least likely of TT's *Lego* games to the most obvious, its hi-tech carnival of freaks and statesmen fitting perfectly into that diminutive mould. It still feels like the riskiest game, as well, but what's a crimefighter supposed to do?



These wonderful toys

Even without the security of a widely known plot, *Lego Batman* is impossible to spoil: there's just too much of it, its comic direction too tough to predict. Some details, then, nabbed from TT's office whiteboard. Together with characters such as the Scarecrow and the Joker, the game includes several locations known to comic readers and moviegoers alike. There's Arctic World, the Penguin's theme park lair, and the Botanic Gardens, home to Poison Ivy. There's an early trip to 'Fort Blox', which gives some insight into at least one criminal caper. And there are the more urban, commonplace environments, the streets, rooftops, sewers and docks.





Technology shared between *Batman* and *Lego Indiana Jones* means both have evocative special effects, from reflective surfaces to light refraction. Lego Gotham blurs the line between concept art and game, TT's artists responding to the darker atmosphere. The list of special moves points to a typically high level of interactivity

FORMAT **360, PS3 WII**
PUBLISHER **SEGA**
DEVELOPER **SUMO DIGITAL**
ORIGIN **UK**
RELEASE **MARCH**

Sega Superstars Tennis

It's strawberries and cream for all as Sega's star brands get some exercise

Sega has a hard-won knowledge of how important it is to keep its brands in the gameplaying public's mind, and following the Christmas sales success of *Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games*, the next dose headed for retail shelves is *Sega Superstars Tennis*. So, no prizes for guessing that this is a tennis game featuring the Sega back catalogue as playable characters, bundled with an assortment of minigames.

Sticking the jaded cynic back in his grey box, however, it has to be admitted that *Sega Superstars Tennis* is – if a little lightweight – undeniably good fun. The tennis itself is a slightly neutered variant of *Virtua Tennis*, with character-specific special moves that add some colour and a tactical veneer, all played out on levels based around a particular Sega game and bustling with incidental details. The minigames are varied and stay true to the tennis theme, with the *House Of The Dead* mode a particular highlight with multiple players – zombies appear on one side of the court before shambling towards the participants, and have to be kept back with judicious shot placement.

Few companies outside of Nintendo have as many familiar faces on the roster as Sega, and hopefully this title will be a dry run for trying out a few more from the back catalogue

The roster contains all of the kiddie-friendly hedgehogs you might expect, but the depth of is a welcome surprise. Alex Kidd hasn't been forgotten about, and members of the *Jet Set Radio* and *Space Channel 5* casts are welcomed back. *Sega Superstars Tennis* may end up as little more than a fun diversion with some candy coating, but at its best it plays a solid game with a certain charm, and may inspire some fond memories of *Mario Tennis*.

As important as the visuals is the soundtrack, which brings back classics from *Jet Set Radio*, among others

FORMAT **360**
PUBLISHER **TORPEX GAMES**
DEVELOPER **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN **US**
RELEASE **2008**

Schizoid

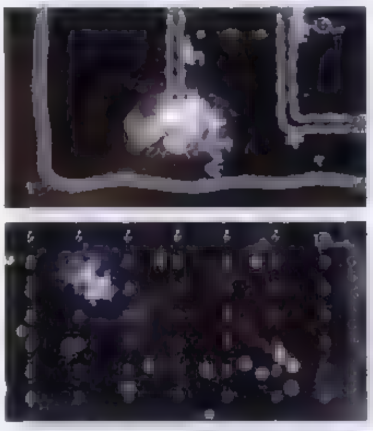
Can the first Live Arcade title to spring from Microsoft's XNA initiative cut it at the top?

WiiWare and XNA offer low-cost routes into console development – an obvious boon for independents and bedroom coders, to whom such platforms might otherwise remain off limits. Microsoft and Nintendo, meanwhile, must be hoping that these independent developers will furnish their console with the next *Tetris* or, in Torpex Games' case, the next *Geometry Wars*. *Schizoid* has a particularly difficult task, not only in its responsibility to validate the XNA scheme but also to prove itself within a genre that has a ready seen countless permutations on its simple *Robotron* roots.

***Schizoid* encourages teamwork – power-ups are only activated when you touch your partner, and may require co-ordination: the razorwire joins the ships by a cable**

The results so far suggest that *Schizoid* will be a cut above the numerous free *Geometry Wars* clones available on the internet, but its budget beginnings are nonetheless apparent. Its twist on the formula is to enforce co-operative play by stipulating that you can only destroy enemies of your own colour. Teamwork really is essential, either with the AI wingman or another player, as you combat enemies with varying characteristics – some pursuing you, others moving randomly, others still emitting bursts of projectiles. Each level entertains some different element of strategy, and the use of power-ups allows players to approach the challenges in new ways – indeed, the first 60 levels available for preview showed a fair amount of diversity. Wingman AI for the most part is adequate, but the inability to communicate with it in the way you would a real co-op partner obviously closes down some options.

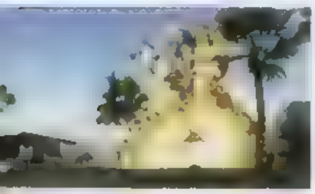
Nonetheless, the question remains whether *Schizoid* does enough to distinguish itself in an overcrowded genre. Unlike many of its peers, the game doesn't go for a striking visual aesthetic, the explosions which signal your death are the only remarkable effects in a game which otherwise lacks the spartan retro charm achieved by comparable games like *Everyday Shooter* (see p103). There are some subtleties – particularly pleasing is the way in which the mission structure has been conceived to ensure progress even among weak players – but, with so much competition, *Schizoid* will have to hope that its emphasis on co-op play will be enough set it apart.



A mode unlocked after completing the first tier of levels allows you to try controlling both ships simultaneously

The players' ships are big and sluggish – there's none of *Geometry Wars'* agile evasion here. Since you move at a speed roughly equal to that of the enemies, you often find yourself engaged in interminable Benny Hill-style chases

FORMAT **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER **AVALANCHE STUDIOS SWEDEN**
ORIGIN **US**
RELEASE **TBA**



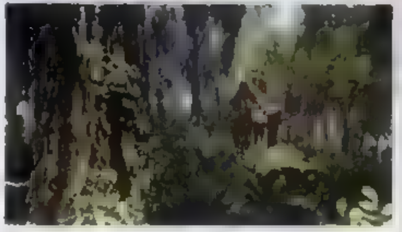
There can't have been many better visual promises for a game than this, and we hope it makes it into the marketing somewhere: 'Buy *Just Cause 2* and you can hijack a flying helicopter while staring its pilot in the eye and soaring over a mountain'

Just Cause 2

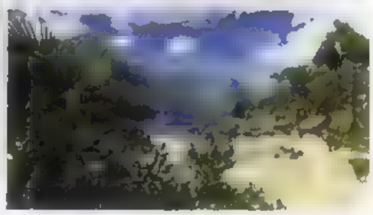
I believe in freedom for all people. And the right to franchise myself

Just Cause was always lush. Even when the mechanics let it down, it was quite something to sit and admire. Sensibly, there's no movement away from this in the sequel – Rico Rodriguez has a new mission on the South Pacific island of Panau, which manages to conveniently have an ecosystem that contains snowy mountains, tropical forests and lots of evil baddies that need shooting. And is that some dynamic weather on the horizon?

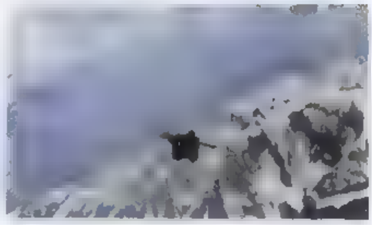
The story centres on Rico's former CO, Tom Sheldon, who has gone rogue and is wanted back by 'the Agency'. Panau is run by a bad egg who was obviously bullied at school, Baby Panay, and split between three warring gangs looking for supremacy. Sheldon's in with all of them. Sorting it all out will be achieved in the most natural way: sensationally impossible stunts, blowing lots of things up, and generally causing havoc. Rico's parachute is back and the grappling hook is now permanently strapped to his arm, and as such expect to be able to hijack airborne vehicles and leap tall buildings.



The pretty vegetation will be full of places to hide yourself from enemies, who will now seek cover among the greenery themselves. A bit of Rambo-style guerilla warfare, anyone?



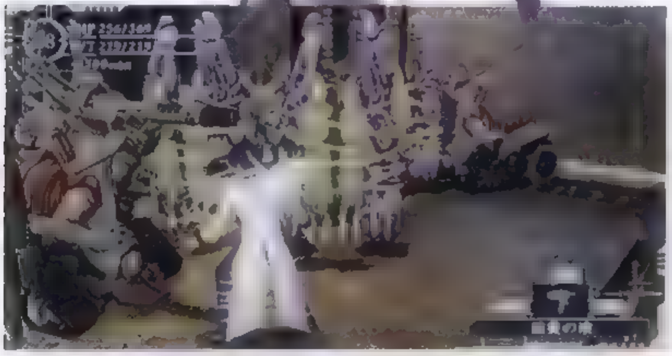
Enemy AI has been overhauled from the pedestrian levels of the original, and a new 'chaos' system promises that your actions will have an impact upon the wider area of the map. On that note, there are several self-contained islands in the game, and each mission has a number of possible approaches, with over 100 vehicles available for your pleasure – from a bike to a Boeing 747. *Just Cause* was a good idea with some big flaws, and if they can be ironed out for this sequel, it could be one to watch – rather than just one to look at.

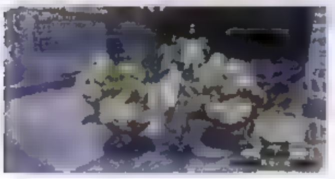


Rico will travel between the several small islands that make up the game by air and by sea, but we all know how he likes to make an entrance: his parachute, formerly of the click-and-billow variety, now affects momentum more realistically. But hopefully not *that* realistically.

FORMAT **PS2, WII**
PUBLISHER **ATLUS**
DEVELOPER **STING**
ORIGIN **JAPAN**
RELEASE **MARCH**

The hero has two stats, SP and HP, the first of which represents sanity and essentially functions as armour. As health drops, actions are impaired





Baroque

Elaborate – but far more than just a period piece

Baroque was first released way back when on the Sega Saturn, a firstperson action adventure with manga-inspired visuals set in a universe composed of unusual portmanteau creatures. Set in the aftermath of a disaster known as 'the blaze' which destroyed the world and distorted reality, *Baroque* concentrates on the personal illusions that sustain people in its post-apocalyptic environments.

Needless to say, these manifest in some of the world's denizens transforming into warped enemies, while others occupy a more ambiguous role in relation to your ongoing adventure – which itself is split between the scorched Outer World and the warped Neuro Tower, the latter of which shifts its reality constantly. If all this sounds a little heavy, *Baroque* plays fairly traditionally and combat holds no real surprises – although the Wii does allow for both the thirdperson camera and the original FPS viewpoint, with controls similar to *Metroid Prime 3*.

The trailer for *Baroque* has some ponderous Latin linking diverse sections, loosely translated as 'we are all one body, all one soul'. It might have something to do with the mysterious religious cult that's a big part of the plot

Weapons can be ranged or melee (the 'angelic rifle' will kill any of the creatures in one hit, but has severely limited ammunition) while your progress through the Neuro Tower is barred by the increasingly strange manifestations of your character's troubled psyche – needless to say, they're a convenient amnesiac and may just have the potential to redeem *Baroque*'s world. While it's hardly a technically accomplished title, *Baroque* promises to be a deep challenge and unusual enough to deserve plenty of scrutiny – clearly, we'll need to spend some more time with this one.

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*In a taste test of 16 Irish Whiskeys by The New York Times, Bushmills 10 year old was rated top pick. (08/03/06).
IRiSH at its BEST

BRICK DANGEROUS

The man in the hat is back, in block. As Lego Indiana Jones is whipped into shape by Traveller's Tales, we head north to plunder its secrets

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

RELEASE: JUNE

ORIGIN: [illegible]K

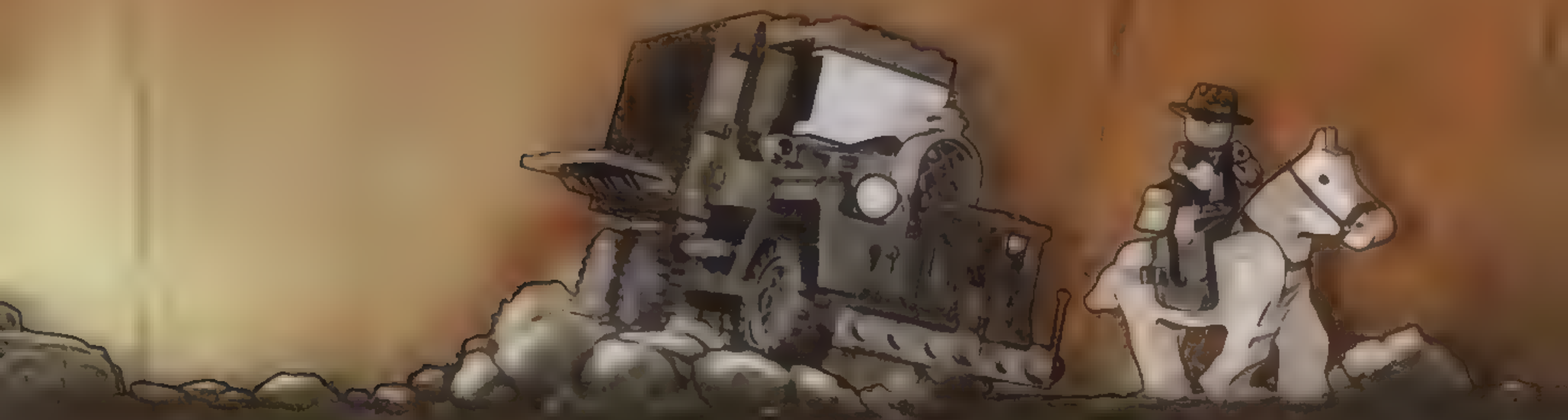
[illegible]

Y[illegible] drawing a thick red line across a [illegible] the Himalayas. No? How about the Peruvian jungle, slipping a pouch of sand on to a button surrounded by mechanisms, poisoned darts and a conspicuously sized boulder. Wrong again? Then it must be Shanghai, groping for the antidote to the poison you just drank. Or Castle Brunwald, locking lips with the Nazis? Assuming you've seen the cover of the magazine you're now reading, you've probably been to all these places during the last few minutes.

For grown-ups, at least, *Lego Indiana Jones* promises a journey of rediscovery. Though it [illegible] level and plasticised scene. But as players who snapped up a whopping 12 million copies of its Star Wars games know, the *Lego* series isn't just about homage, or the cheap fulfilment of a movie tie-in. It's restorative, whittling characters down to iconic handfuls of movements, abilities and expressions. No matter how many times you've seen the movie, Lego puts you back in the cinema on the opening night, primed for the adventure.

"It's all about simplicity," believes **Jonathan Smith** who, with directors **Jon Burton** and Tom Stone, masterminded the merger of Traveller's Tales and its publishing partner, Giant, in 2005. "Wherever we can make things simple, they become stronger. That often means we can make them funnier; it always means we can make the gameplay better. There's a group of older gamers that appreciates the clarity. Y'know, puzzles that make sense, rigorous rules and the way they're applied systemically across the whole game."

To Burton, it's also the closest gaming



[illegible]

has come to the universality of a Pixar movie or The Simpsons: "The parodies appeal to the adults, the kids love Lego and the non-punishing gameplay. And how many products, games or otherwise, have ever been allowed to 'officially' parody a movie with the blessing of its creators? We're in a very fortunate position."

Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures, then, to give it its full name, will officially parody Lucas and Spielberg's matinee juggernaut in the summer, just in time for the fourth movie, Indiana [illegible] it, potentially, will be LucasArts' own Indy game, still known more for its use of NaturalMotion's Euphoria engine than its themes or plot. Yet according to Smith, the birth of *Lego Indy* wasn't preordained by the movements of the franchise. Nor was there an exchange of pitches, or an initiating phone call from Skywalker Ranch: "It was just a natural place to go," he says. "Exciting adventures in different locations, with a great host of characters that you could have some fun with." "More so than *Lego THX 1138*," laughs **Nick Ricks**, the game's publishing producer.

[illegible]

Indy is that, for the more cautious of critics, it neither looks nor acts like a [illegible]

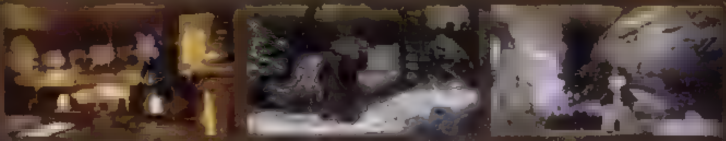
[illegible] with such care as to look immediately like those of a point-'n'-click, their geometry and art melting into a kind of pseudo-2D. Like the classic *Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis*, we remark. More like *Broken Sword*, says Smith: "We've been doing these Lego games for a while, and it's literally difficult to imagine what we'd have to do to get someone to go: 'What were you thinking?' Because we're just thinking along the lines we should. Every individual on the team has the depth of knowledge of Lego and that innate sense of what's appropriate."

Relatively speaking, it's still early days for this Lego genre – prototyping of *Lego Star Wars* began in 2003 – yet TT has gained fluency not just in Lego architecture, but also the filmic language needed to breathe life into

"The parodies appeal to the adults, the kids love Lego and the non-punishing gameplay. We're in a fortunate position"

[illegible] prototype kits for whichever Lego series it's working on. Its Knutsford office has more Lego than the most spoiled child

Lego's reinventions of the movies' famous scenes are inspiring



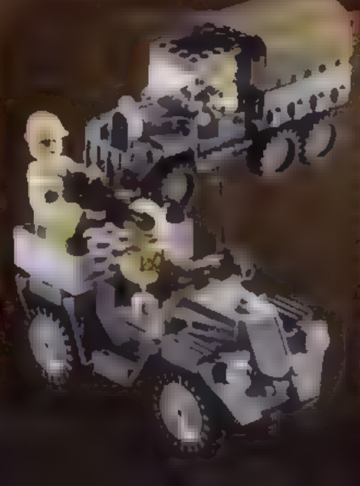
Together with these authentic scenes, *Lego Indy* also features the opening from The Last Crusade, together with a Lego version of River Phoenix's young Indy. The game also features all the music from the movies and TV series.

its licensed kits. Its artists, designers and engineers know where lines must be drawn between movie and toy, and where game technology can overlap them. "So much of it is just natural," says Smith, his repeat use of the n-word being the first of many. "You set off on the right foot, which is to say we're going make, without compromise, a brilliant game. Some of the things then come about through particular constraints – choices made right at the start about proportions of Lego, spoken dialogue, etc, that channel our attention when making cutscenes, telling the story and laying out levels. They've yielded a creative ethic."

Indy himself – or Dr Jones as his awkward, bespectacled college professor toy might be known – is the evolution of that ethic. Both guises appear in the game, along with just about every other from the movies. Like a kaleidoscopic Mr Benn, its cast of tribesmen, academics and anonymous anti-Semites (see 'Herr today...') boasts a colossal wardrobe of essentially funny costumes. And by walking from one end of TT's office to the other (it takes just a few seconds) you can follow the evolution of that comedy from squat plastic caricature into surprisingly nuanced mime.

Lego Indy is funnier than *Lego Star Wars*. It is, believe it or not, funnier than that old Chocolate Orange advert, and not just because its cutscenes are better timed, framed and pitched than before. Drama, believes Ricks, makes a better target than mere derring-do – and the darker it gets, the more potent the lampoon. So as Indy plunges the Staff Of Ra into the floor of the Map Room, turning sunlight into a focused beam, of course he should either blind himself or set the place on fire (we'll leave you to discover which). And as the sadistic Major Toht stares into the Ark Of The Covenant, the ink is flushed off his pea-sized face. Thanks to Lego's models, gags like this write themselves.

Digitally designed at Lego and sent straight to TT's artists, each Lego toy is scrutinised by Lucasfilm from birth. Because the Lego anatomy leaves little room for physical uniqueness, the onus is on palette and accessories to make them instantly recognisable, and also lovable. And wherever there's absurdity, exaggeration is assured. Mola Ram's ceremonial headdress, for example, or the granny glasses of Major Toht



HERR TODAY...

[illegible]

"We discussed the whole thing about having an iron cross or an eagle, but we don't need it. The Indiana Jones characters are so strong that when an SS guy appears with a long black jacket, mean-looking face and a black hat, you don't need a historical context to know he's a bad guy. That said, we like to reinforce the fact that these really are terrible, terrible people."

Appearing in a toy store near you, the Well Of Souls with its Anubis statues, reptile residents and a tablet with C3PO and R2D2. The walls are hinged, and the idea is that you knock the statues over to free any trapped archaeologists

Some of *Lego Indy's* key talent (from top): lead artist James Cunliffe, publishing producer Nick Ricks, publishing VP Jonathan [illegible] and [illegible] John Hodskinson

Short Round, Indy's already miniature sidekick from *Temple Of Doom*, is captured brilliantly by simply halving the length of his legs. Only rarely does TT have to invent something the toys have overlooked, examples here being an elephant and camel.

"Remember the early tests with the yellow skin?" recalls **John Hodskinson**, the game's lead programmer. Smith explains: "When we did our first prototypes for *Lego Star Wars*, that was before Lego company had made the decision to use flesh tones for their licensed properties."

"Which at the time felt quite strange," adds Hodskinson, "for a Lego character to have skin colour. Now, of course, it'd just look wrong to have yellow characters."

"Mace Windu would be hard," agrees lead artist **James Cunliffe**.

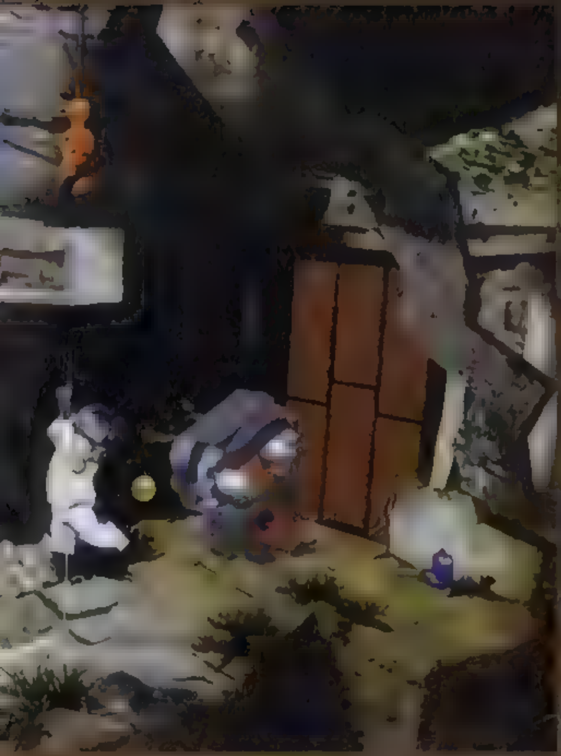
"[illegible] got some leeway we might not have [illegible] the Lego company appreciates that [illegible] to do things in a videogame with their [illegible], their toys, that they couldn't have imagined happening in any other context," says Smith. "Particularly distorting the figures, for example, to make them come to life. That could have been really frowned upon but we were lucky in that, right from the start, they knew we were doing something different. And they were carried off by Jeremy [Pardon, the game's animator] and James with such style that, being, it was right there from the start."

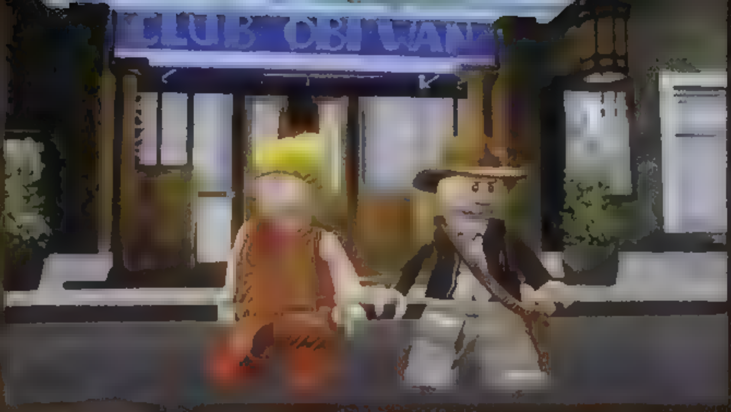
The importance of animation speaks for itself, the Lego company's directive being typically keen: these are human characters in Lego form, not dolls hampered by hinged joints and claws. While it took 45 animations to capture the superhuman antics of a Jedi Knight, Indy boasts 128, a facial animation tagged to each one. None, insists Smith, is there for the sake of it, even if the game's technology is on par with that of Prince Caspian, the lifelike Narnia sequel in development upstairs. TT's software, developed by an R&D unit in the 'engine room' downstairs, has greatly streamlined the animation process since *Lego Star Wars*, automating the incidental movements which once required painstaking work. So as Indy cracks his whip round an overhanging joist, launching himself across a spiked pit, a cascade of animations flows throughout his body. The limits, we're told, are the points at which seaming or clipping would occur – where Lego limbs just wouldn't be enough.

> "In Indy, you'll be changing what your character can do throughout the level. We never worried about gadgets and gimmicks"

And when, faced with a sword-swinging zealot of the Thuggee, you punch those ever-so-simple combinations of buttons, the evolution continues. Smith explains: "In *Lego Star Wars*, the characters existed as functions of a limited set of [illegible] – the abilities they had in order to do different things in the levels. In *Indy*, you'll be [illegible] your character can do [illegible]

This digital landscape of Lego pieces is a key part of the process. Only recently was a strict system [illegible]





Indy's sets have comedy literally written all over them. Club Obi Wan is the obvious example, while Lucas-related glyphs are scattered throughout the levels

worried about gadgets and gimmicks because he's clearly a guy who can make use of whatever he finds lying around. Resourcefulness is one of his key attributes, and we had plans for new uses of Lego that would give the sense of new features and abilities."

Without ever threatening to be an everyday adventure, *Lego Indy* is a more recognisable one than *Lego Star Wars*. The blissfully simple logic of pulling levers to open doors, building platforms to reach them and then destroying them (and everything else) for studs has grown into something more open and explorative. Without the Force, a Jedi's one-touch skeleton key, everything's also more Earthly, though hardly grounded in reality.

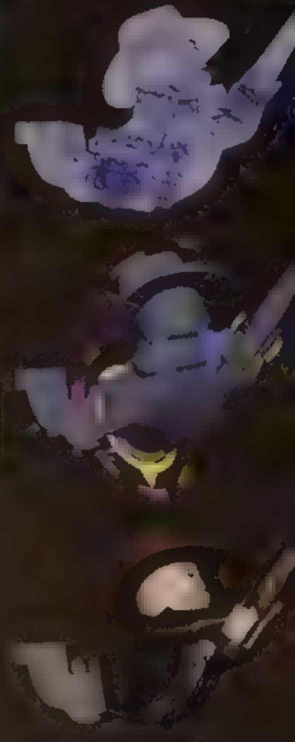
Together with his whip, which can be flung out at enemies and scenery while moving, Indy's most powerful weapon appears to be the spade – a base ability shared by his fellow characters. Digging yields weapons and bonuses, some essential, others simply convenient or desirable. And by limiting the ammunition available for guns, TT has ensured no troubling flashbacks to the free-firing chaos of *Star Wars*' troopers. Lego objects must be physically carried from place to place, sometimes by both players at once, and often combined to form more varied, functional mechanisms than before. Though every character has their own unique skill, the whip naturally seems most attractive, Indy also able to climb it before clambering along ledges.

"I think, generally, we just try and give [the characters] more to do," says Hodskinson. "They feel more like people, and although they've got more abilities they don't feel like superheroes."

"But neither do they feel mundane," advises Smith, "in ways that human characters sometimes can. They've still got real differentiation between their abilities – they're still iconic. We spent quite a lot of time initially thinking about how far we could add complexity to some of the systems, in terms of moving around Lego bricks and carrying them to different spaces. The co-operative carrying mechanic as well – we've actually stripped a lot of that out to make the game play better. The editing process comes about through the methodology – the approach of making a game here – which is very, very iterative, and actually quite ad-hoc. Because there's no major, risky R&D functionality in there, it means we can carry that through in a beneficial way."

Nowhere is that more obvious than in the manufacture of levels which, thanks to software that juggles debug, editing and realtime environments, is practically a game in itself. It almost was a game, in fact, when the team toyed with the idea of making a pared-down version – a virtual Lego set, essentially – available to players. Higher priorities and the lack of keyboard and mouse scuppered that idea, TT getting to keep the fun to itself.

Assembled literally from a big pile of Lego – OK, not so much a pile as a digitally arranged carpet – the three chapters and 18 levels of *Lego Indy* are built in tandem by separate tech and art teams, the first handling the layout and function, the second the now gorgeous detail. TT's Lego wisdom means that while the bricks themselves are handled with delicate authenticity, everything else gets the Hollywood treatment, now more than ever. The catacombs beneath Pankot shimmer



From top: a complex wireframe Indy; animation controls show all the possibilities; the final model

PRESSURE PADS

[illegible] DS follows a highly successful port of *Lego Star* [illegible] honest-to-goodness platforming on the machine [illegible] versions, meaning that everyone [illegible] contextual actions [illegible] locks require touchscreen interactions, while blowing the screen inflicts double blowpipe damage and inflates rafts. Unlike the home versions, in which a monkey can be summoned to pull levers with the throw of a banana, here you can directly control him (until, presumably, you happen upon some 'bad dates'). Thanks to Pankot Banquet, meanwhile, one of several standalone minigames, you can also try your hand at cooking up snake surprise or – yes – chilled monkey brains.

The increased abilities of Indy, his friends and enemies should provide a satisfying step up for Lego veterans, as well as ensuring that the game is a unique departure from *Star Wars*

behind walls of heat, its stone reddened by subterranean fires; God rays punch through the canopies of Peru; and the Canyon Of The Crescent Moon swelters and fades beneath the sun. Complex stuff for TT, but never enough to cloud objectives, challenge, or what's frighteningly easy to forget: that this is a game for kids as well as adults.

Confined to a single wing of its offices yet leaving ample breathing space for both people and toys, TT's key Lego teams don't just represent a family, but a family of families. Many, if not most, of its artists and engineers have children, many of whom play a persistent role in focus-testing the company's games. We hear how Smith's own kids, having sampled *Lego Indy's* delights, begged first for the toys depicted onscreen, expressing only vague interest in the films that inspired them. It's issues like this that provide a constant fascination for both TT and its observers, the wants and abilities of the very young being integral to the firm's incredible success.

"Certainly for *Indy*," says Ricks, "we're all very big fans of the films but perhaps, to a younger generation, they may not have that assumed knowledge. So we're conscious that, if we're putting a puzzle in or describing how a mechanic works, that has to appeal to someone who's never seen any of the Indiana Jones films."

"If we're putting a puzzle in or describing how a mechanic works, that has to appeal to someone who's never seen any of the films"

"Yet kids learn so quickly," says Smith. "Last night I was playing *Portal*, which conceptually is a quite difficult game to come to terms with. I show it to my wife and she can't play it – she has to leave the room because she feels sick. But my eight-year-old son, sitting next to me, absolutely got it and was saying: 'You need a portal over there, do this and do that'. They will take on any concept."

So do the kids have the final word? Say there was a puzzle or gag which only adults got, would that be cause to remove it? "It's hard to imagine what that could possibly be," says Smith. "Any child who could play *Lego Star Wars* has the capabilities of any adult who could play it. I suppose if we were to put in some brain-teaser type minigame – some Sudoku-type thing,

Yet another of Indy's companions joins the micro version of John Rhys-Davies' Sallah. The light shimmering off both the Ark Of The Covenant and the figures is one of several new effects

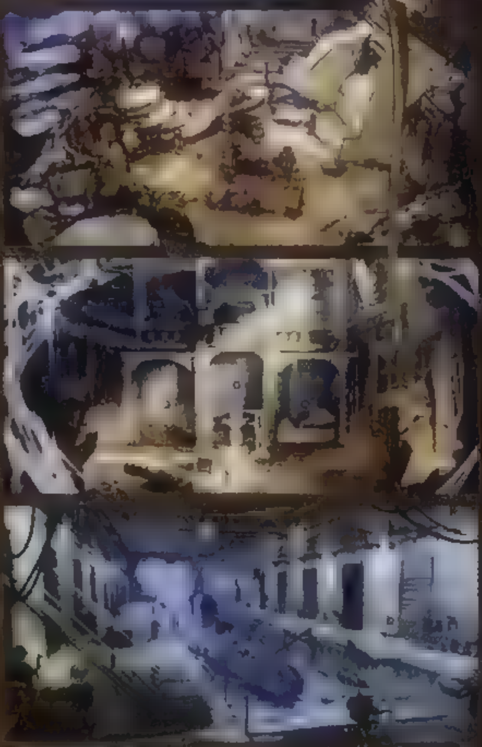
"We did mess with minigames," Ricks recalls from the game's early days, "with access panels and stuff like that. We actually spent quite a while prototyping those things up, but as we played the game it just became a bit of a chore – they want to use a door, better to have them just press a button and get the animation."

As for the hardcore crowd, usually first to pick holes in the *Lego* series' inclusivity, the team is philosophical. "There are some older players who complain that they find the games too easy," accepts Smith. Too easy, we ask, or too short? "The term's often used loosely, you're right. Though I'm particularly meaning people who complain that they're too easy. And that's because they're used to having to play in a certain way, and that's never going to change the way we do things.

"In terms of collecting and being rewarded, that's endemic to this style of game. In terms of their long-term depth and reward structures, in some ways they were naturally tuned for hardcore gamers. But they're exceptionally appealing to young children as well. Young gamers typically play games for longer than older people, so to have systems that continue to reward you, and objectives that take a long time to achieve, does work for both categories. When it comes to children and adults, we really don't see a differentiation between the two. When we've done stuff for children, we've appreciated it as older gamers. And when we've done stuff naturally or generically as older gamers, children have enjoyed it as well."

Whose hands, though, really hold the fate of *Lego Indiana Jones*? Or that *other* Lego game, for that matter, previewed on p42? Twelve million copies of *Lego Star Wars* say it's not the most troubling thing, but it's important. This game, described by Burton as "a careful next step", is as much about the future of this Lego genre as it is the chronicles of the Jones boys. "We don't want to change the game so much that we lose the audience," he adds, "and the more things we can keep intact about the formula, the better. If by some chance the game isn't a success, then we'll know it's probably something about Star Wars that works so well."

It doesn't seem likely. The grittier tone and occult fascinations of *Indy* will, if anything, reinforce Lego's power as a family entertainer. It will be fun. It *will* be massive. And who knows where TT's Lego-fication of popular culture is going to stop – *Lego Lord Of The Rings*? *Lego Harry Potter*? (Another of Lego's licensed lines, and surely a possibility.) *Lego Sopranos*? (That was our suggestion.) Smith has an idea – perhaps more than that – but he's keeping the details under his hat. "Many more *Lego* games," he promises, "many new places, and many new things for the foundations of Lego design. Yes, we've got many [illegible] have to wait and see."



It may be movie-based, but that doesn't rule out concept art. TT's take on these adventures involves beautifully sketched Lego versions of the Nazi ceremonial plateau (top), the Well Of Souls (centre), and a U-boat (above)

SNAKE SURPRISE

One of the more unlikely mechanics in *Lego Indy* is [illegible] that constant reminder of Indy's snake problem [illegible] take the occasional back seat. So when the path ahead is a slithering one, Indy's about as effective as Kate Capshaw's Willie in a room full of bugs. Likewise, characters like Henry Jones can expect to suffer the same mobility problems as a Star Wars droid, though time will tell if his umbrella comes to the rescue.

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EVER DECREASING CIRCLES

SEVEN YEARS AFTER THE INTRODUCTION OF ITS FIRST CONSOLE, MICROSOFT IS WAGING A NEW WAR WITH XBOX 360 – AGAINST ITSELF

In September 2005, Microsoft's Xbox division reported it had lost a total of four billion dollars during its four years of involvement in the console race. For any other company, that might have been the end of their involvement in the industry. For Microsoft, it was the necessary price to gain a foothold in the burgeoning videogame market and the prelude to, two months later, launching the Xbox 360. With that move, Microsoft forced the beginning of the current generation. The timing was always intended to give the 360 a head start on its competitors and had mixed results: on the one hand, consumers upgraded and the 360 certainly got its lead in early (to the tune of nearly ten million units), but on the other the allegedly rushed testing of the hardware resulted in the infamous 'Red Ring of Death' phenomenon, and the costliest warranty extension in videogame history. But more than two years since that launch, and now facing some stiff competition, is the 360 in the dominant position Microsoft claims – or does the console rule an empire built on quicksand?

The 360 has several major achievements to its name: a software catalogue currently unmatched by its competitors, a peerless online service, and arguably the best traditional controller of those available. It has created a fiercely loyal community, and worldwide sales of the 360 were announced by Microsoft at January's Consumer Electronics Show: they stand at 17.7 million worldwide, with around seven million of those in North America.

Returning to that $4 billion (£2 billion) 'investment' in entering the market, 2008 was always cited by Microsoft as the year in which it expected the Xbox division to begin turning a profit. Surprisingly, it's ahead of schedule: the last two financial quarters have seen positive results. Of course, these periods included *Halo 3* amid a raft of other high-profile exclusives, and do not include the $1 billion reserved for the 360's new three-year warranty (of which more later), but they regardless represent a significant achievement for the 360. Over the period of July 1 to December 31 2007, the Xbox Entertainment and Device Division reported an income of $522 million (£263 million) from a total revenue of $5.53 billion (£2.8 billion). The division also incorporates PC games and accessories, phone operating systems and Zune, but Microsoft itself attributed the increase in revenue primarily to 'increased Xbox 360 console sales, videogame sales led by *Halo 3*, Xbox Live revenues, and Xbox 360 accessory sales'. Wondering just how big or small a part of Microsoft the division is? That total revenue of $5.53 billion was part of a $30.3 billion (£15.2 billion) total revenue in the same period, so some rough-as-they-come beermat sums would tell you it's about 18.25 per cent – a proportion that, even allowing for the varied products contained in the division, puts to rest the sneery idea that Microsoft can simply afford to throw money at the brand. And sure enough, the 360 has hit Microsoft's business targets: in particular, Bill Gates' E3 2006 prediction that the console would sell 10,000,000 units by the end of 2006 was surpassed by nearly half a million.

But think about the figures for a moment. If 1.5 million 360s were sold by the end of 2005,

The console has been bundled with various titles – notably with *Pro Evolution Soccer* for Europe – but it's still unclear whether the decision to create a hierarchy of options with differences in outputs and storage is attracting consumers towards 360 or confusing them

Halo 3 has maintained the standard set by Halo 2 online, offering the player an experience that's streamlined, extremely easy to use and gets matches going against players of a roughly similar standard quickly. It's a mystery its matchmaking system hasn't been widely copied

10.4 million by the end of 2006, and 17.7 million by the end of 2007, then the Xbox 360 sold significantly fewer units in 2007 than it did in 2006. The bad news doesn't stop there. 2007 saw its head start battered aside by the unstoppable Wii with little chance of redress, and the PlayStation 3 reaching the 9.5 million unit mark worldwide. The only territory in which it outsold the PS3 was North America, and without the sales spike around *Halo 3* things would have looked considerably worse.

It seems strange that this is the case. After all, with its obvious attributes and its late 2007 software lineup, why didn't the Xbox 360 dominate the year and the Christmas period in particular? Microsoft began 2007 with a huge unit lead, its biggest game properties due to arrive on the shelves, plus a significant marketing spend, and in the event managed to sell less hardware than the previous year. Of course, hardware sales are only part of the story, and software is where the real money lies for platform holders and thirdparties. In this respect, the 360 is in rude health, boasting an attach rate of seven games per console, far in advance of Nintendo and Sony's figures, as **Phil Spencer**, the general manager of Microsoft Game Studios Europe, is keen to point out. "If you're a thirdparty thinking about where your game might work, the 360 has got to be at the centre of your business case."

The 360's software catalogue is deserving of such success, and for a certain section of the market is the most comprehensive available: exclusives such as *BioShock*, *Blue Dragon*, *Crackdown*, *Dead Rising*, *Forza Motorsport 2*, *Gears Of War*, *Lost Odyssey*, *Mass Effect*, *Project Gotham Racing 4* and cross platform titles such as *Assassin's Creed*, *Burnout Paradise*, *Call Of Duty 4*, *FIFA '08*, *Need For Speed Pro Street* and *Pro Evolution Soccer 2008* cover a lot of bases. For players who specifically enjoy the established videogame genres, the Xbox 360 is currently the machine of choice.

[illegible]

360 BOASTS AN ATTACH RATE OF SEVEN GAMES PER CONSOLE, FAR IN ADVANCE OF NINTENDO AND SONY

Phil Spencer, the general manager of Microsoft Game Studios Europe, admits that 2008 "isn't a *Halo 3* year" for Microsoft, but is still confident

Despite some very strong competition from *Call Of Duty 4*, the one and only Master Chief has regained top dog status on Xbox Live, now and for the foreseeable future

Crackdown was perhaps underestimated on release (it came with a *Halo 3* beta key) but has proved one of the 360's most enduring titles

There's one more title to add, but it doesn't seem to suit lists. It's difficult to discuss the Xbox story in any sense without mentioning it: *Halo*. Its importance cannot be overstated: the first game was the biggest-selling Xbox title for four years in a row, then *Halo 2* was released and became the best selling Xbox game worldwide, redefining the online component of console games and dominating Xbox Live until the release of *Gears Of War*. In September 2007 *Halo 3* was released and instantly became the 360 title with the highest worldwide sales (currently standing at just over eight million copies) and was responsible for the only mass-market special edition of the 360, an unfortunate gold and green creation (which, weirdly, didn't come with the game itself).

It's an overwhelmingly important IP for Microsoft, far more so than any single title is for Sony – which is why Christmas 2008 will see both *Halo Wars* and *Halo Chronicles* released, and it will be no surprise to see the franchise's momentum refuelled on an annual basis until the inevitable *Halo 4*. The title's success simply can't be denied – and nor can the fact that it's first and foremost a gamer's game, built around infinitely nuanced controls and a Legendary difficulty setting, set up to be tweaked and played in variants, rewarding myopic devotion with superhuman levels of skill, and built to sustain a huge online community for years to come. Many of those traits are shared by the breadth of the 360's software catalogue: first-person shooters, deep racing titles, third-person action adventures, sports titles and old-school JRPGs. These are gamers' games: traditional games, and, importantly, some of the greatest ever made.

But if you want success – a chance of a PlayStation 2 level of success and industry dominance – is that the right kind of portfolio to be pushing? "The PS2's line-up is an ongoing software success story, its sales still keeping pace with and regularly exceeding the current generation of machines, and the reason is that its range of third-party titles accommodate any demand any gamer could make." It's a lesson that hasn't been lost on Spencer. "If you look at the third-party portfolio for the 360 now, and its success on a worldwide basis relative to the PS3, it's obviously different to PS2 versus Xbox. You see those breadth titles that third parties ship, be it the *Lego* series, the Pixar movie games, *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band*, and they're all coming to our console."

In comparison to the original Xbox, it's true that on paper the 360's line-up has a wider appeal. But if the console's portfolio is unfairly accused of being all about bald space marines and fast cars, there still remains an overwhelming dominance of traditional genres in the software catalogue, and a doubt over Microsoft's ability to cater to the videogame mass-market. It's noticeable how contrived the 360's casual software can seem. *Viva Piñata* became the poster child for Microsoft's attempt to convince the industry of the console's family appeal, and is still being touted over a year after release – surely indicative of a lack of depth in the area. While the 'inspiration' that Spencer took from *Buzz!* is obvious, the promotion of a mini-game collection themed around *Viva Piñata* for Christmas 2007 might seem

[illegible]

The Xbox 360 Premium (far left) is the most common version of the console while the HDMI-enabled Elite was introduced in 2007, and the rather more distinctive special *Halo 3* edition to go with the launch of Bungie's game

Dead Rising offered an early glimpse of what the 360 could do, eventually giving way to many games offering fewer surprises

to tell its own story. After mentioning *Kameo*, *Viva Piñata* and *Scene It* in this context, Spencer claims: "I don't look at any one game as the lynchpin to the broadening or non-broadening of our portfolio" – but the problem is that even if individuals don't, the 360's software seems to reflect just such a thought.

This is the fundamental issue facing Microsoft: the likes of *Ape Escape*, *Buzz!*, *Disaster Report*, the EyeToy, *God Of War*, *Guitar Hero*, *Killzone* and *SingStar* did not sell to the same people – the 'massmarket' – but smaller groups with specific tastes. The 'casual gamer' doesn't exist – there is no homogenous group that can be targeted with one or two releases over a period of time. *Viva Piñata* and *Scene It* on their own are not the answer, and releasing blue and pink pads is a basic move. The big question about the future of the Xbox 360 is not how good its software is or will be – because in its niche, it's excellent – but whether Microsoft is happy with the audience it has attracted with that software, and if not, whether it needs to rethink its entire strategy to expand beyond that current audience.

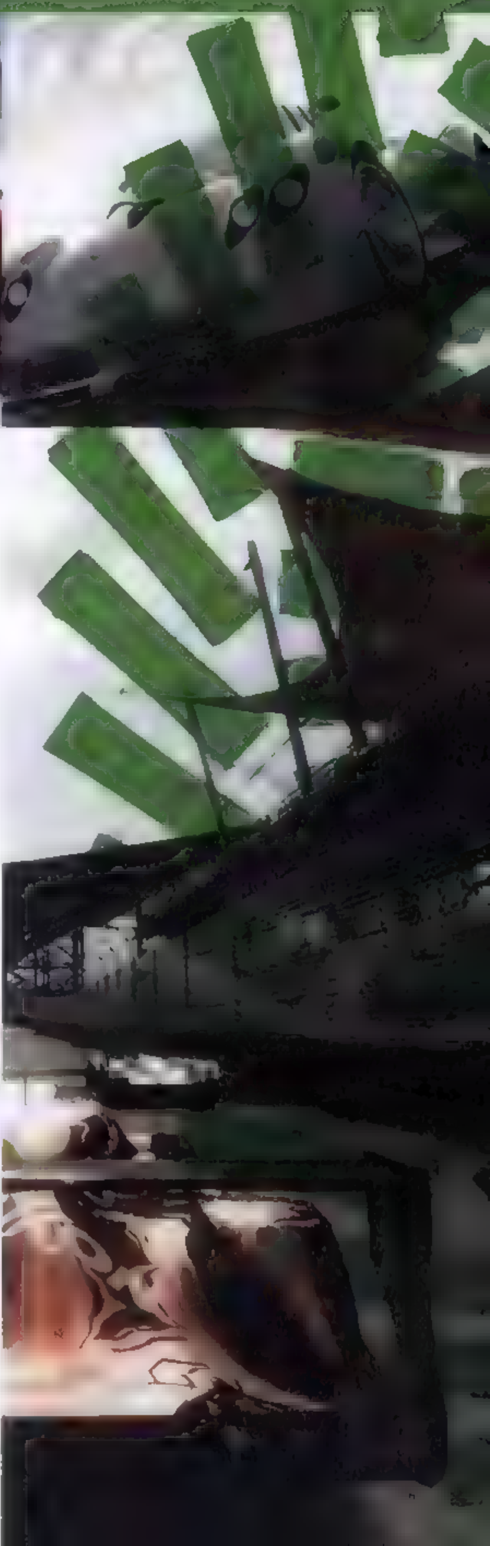
It's worth pausing briefly to consider Xbox Live Arcade, something that isn't easily categorised. It arguably supplies the casual titles that the main software catalogue doesn't, with titles such as *Carcassonne*, *Hexic*, *Pac-Man* and *Zuma*. But the most popular title of last year was the arcade beat 'em up *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, suggesting that the largest market for XBLA is nostalgia – specifically, the nostalgia of 25-year-old males for the arcade games of their youth. Jeff Minter's recent ill-advised rant about the commercial failure of *Space Giraffe* was against exactly this reality of the service and – eschewing any assessment of *Space Giraffe's* quality as a game – demonstrates that it can be a risky outlet for truly small developers. Unsurprisingly, Spencer disagrees with that assessment. "Looking at it from the perspective of what's sold the most is obviously a valid way of looking at a portfolio. But another way of cutting it is looking at the breadth of games on Live Arcade and then you go all the way from checkers to *Turtles*, and the breadth is there on Live Arcade at a very affordable price point for the customer. Live Arcade is a huge asset."

It's a fair point. And if there's one area in which Microsoft is almost entirely praiseworthy, it's Xbox Live in general and the quality of the 360's online functionality. Despite the occasional hitch, neither Sony nor Nintendo have yet come close to the widespread integration of online functionality into almost every title that the Xbox 360 offers, whether

The 360 has seen more accessories over time, from the Xbox 360 Messenger Chat Pad (above) to the big button controllers that come with *Scene It*. Arguably the console's greatest achievement in this area, however, is its standard controller, whose design is a genuine evolution over the Xbox original

It's easy to forget some of Microsoft's smaller Xbox 360 innovations, especially when they relate to pure cosmetics, as is the case with the optional fascias. There's no denying their [illegible], though: a huge number of third-party options have accompanied key game releases

Several of Microsoft's most successful franchises made their debut on the original Xbox, including *Forza* and *PGR*, and it's to Microsoft Game Studios' credit that recent instalments pushed each series' characteristics, and the hardware, rather than simply resting on laurels



simple leaderboards or full-scale deathmatches. Whether the PlayStation Network can match the functionality and ease of Xbox Live has yet to be fully proven – but even if it does, the lead gained by Microsoft in this area is significant. It has fostered a loyal community willing to pay for a quality service that spreads positive word of mouth and encourages their friends to try the service.

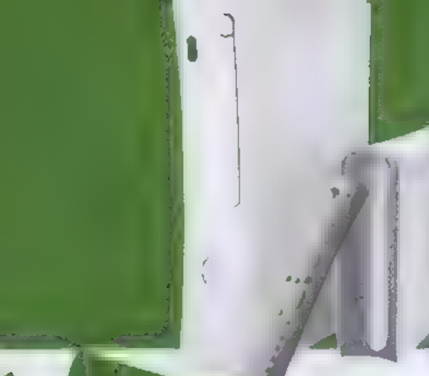
But this can also work against Xbox Live, because customers are paying for that quality of service. Over Christmas 2007, Live proved itself unable to cope with the demands of the season and was either down or intermittent for weeks on end. Microsoft arguably exacerbated this situation by refusing to communicate either what the problems were caused by or when fixes could be expected, eventually offering an obscure XBLA title as 'thanks for loyalty'.

But next to the 360's real problems, the odd few weeks of downtime for Xbox Live seem almost like a holiday. We mean, of course, the Red Ring of Death, the focal point of fanboys and competitors. In short, the Xbox 360 is subject to hardware failure in numbers unprecedented in the modern videogame console industry, with many unofficial estimates placing the figure at 30-35 per cent of the total shipped. Last year saw customer complaints reach fever pitch, and an eventual involvement from the specialist media, with some outlets claiming hardware defect rates of 30 per cent. Microsoft finally confronted these problems with the announcement of a three-year warranty for all 360 purchases, a climbdown that will cost the firm up to $1 billion (a sum which, incidentally, is not included in any of the Xbox division's current accounts).

But with such a delayed response to such a widespread and ongoing problem, Microsoft tested

ON LIVE ARCADE AT A VERY AFFORDABLE PRICE POINT
FOR THE CUSTOMER. LIVE ARCADE IS A HUGE ASSET"

[illegible] dominance in the racing genre is [illegible], and with the absence of a 'proper' [illegible] game the PS3 is playing catchup



The 360's HD DVD drive was perhaps a little unfairly maligned and managed to sell just under 300,000 units; doubtless the five free films didn't hurt that figure. With the end now in sight for the format wars, however, Microsoft has suggested that it could just as easily release a Blu-ray equivalent

LOTS IN A NAME

In comparison to 'PlayStation' or 'Wii', the 'Xbox' designation arguably has a little of the relic about it, and certainly betrays its work-in-progress origins: the title was derived from an original designation of 'DirectX-Box' (indicating the ubiquity of that software in the machine), which was shortened to Xbox in early email exchanges. Seamus Blackley, the man who first came up with the idea of a Microsoft console, revealed several of the names suggested by marketing types in our Equip special focused on the original Xbox – "samples of that crap" included TAC (Total Action Centre), MARZ (Microsoft Active Reality Zone), CPG (Cyber Play Ground) and VERV (Virtual Entertainment and Reality Venture). We're not making these up. Among the effluence, however, lay a little glimmer of the future: 360 – the Three, Six, Zero.

One of the platform's greatest successes, *Gears Of War* was a critical and commercial triumph, the first 360 title to knock *Halo 2* from its perch at the top of Xbox Live, and hard proof of the machine's graphical capabilities. The game will still be attracting players when its sequel arrives

even its most loyal fans' patience. Remarkably, community loyalty to the 360 is such that even this seems to be considered as an unfortunate side effect of owning a 360, rather than a reason for abandoning the system. Whether this will continue with the likes of the recent Insider interview (see blogs.pcworld.com/gameon/archives/006359.html), which Microsoft refused to comment on, that claims to expose the cost-cutting and negligence that led to the hardware problems – and warns of the business practices that will keep the particularly unreliable Xenon motherboards in circulation – remains to be seen.

It could yet prove an albatross around the neck of the 360's future ambitions as an entertainment and multimedia device – a market where consumers will shortly be spoiled for choice and are less vitriolically loyal to brands than the videogaming public. The 360's role in this future technology is also curious: much more toe-dipping than full immersion. One of the few announcements made at CES 2008, for example, was that Microsoft and BT had partnered for the 360 to be used as part of BT Vision. This partnership seems unusual: BT is hardly one of the leading digital content providers, and its reach is exclusively British. It may be a test for the 360, perhaps of how many consumers who purchase a set-top box want a secondary capability for videogames.

And for multimedia in a wider sense, the 360 is not in a great position to take advantage of future developments: its HD-DVD drive is an expensive external peripheral, and any future Blu-ray support for its installed base will have to be similar, while the console's inability to store the large amounts of data needed for a virtual library (without further expensive proprietary hard drives) is obvious. In terms of content outside of software, Microsoft also wants to keep everything controlled, and accessible only if it says so (a point made clear by *Zune*, if not currently by the Xbox 360). Thus, the Xbox 360 won't play bog-standard MPEGs, or even allow you to transfer music from its hard drive to a PC, and has quirks designed to block very specific behaviours. In this context, DivX support seems an afterthought

[illegible]
AROUND THE NECK OF THE 360'S FUTURE AMBITIONS
AS AN ENTERTAINMENT AND MULTIMEDIA DEVICE

Mass Effect is a flawed but immersive and detailed experience. With BioWare's sale to EA, however, the IP could find its way on to PS3. Spencer admits that "in future I'm not sure what will happen, but there's obviously a great 360 customer base for the franchise"

Sony's decision to make the PS3's architecture as open as it is, specifically with regard to its storage and media tools, looks to be a much more forward-thinking one than Microsoft's choice. Sony is, after all, the company with a music and movies division. When the massmarket does move towards digital distribution, consumers will not want three-day film rentals, they will want to build a collection. The Xbox 360 simply cannot serve that function as it is.

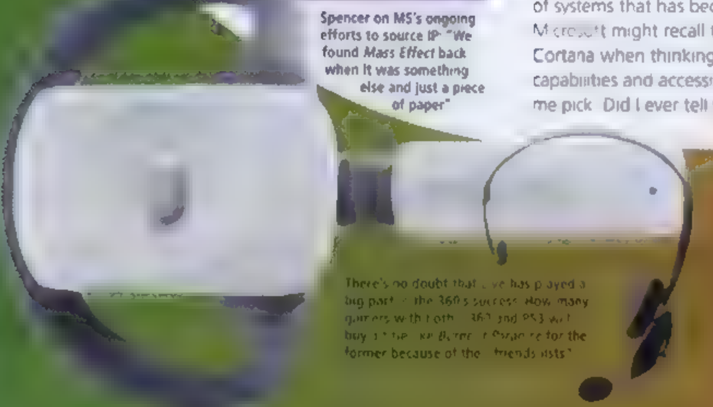
But, in a way, that misses the point. For almost everything that is puzzling about the Xbox 360, there is one simple answer for it. In every sense the Xbox 360 (and any successor) is first and foremost a corollary of Microsoft's Windows business. And Windows is the most important part of the puzzle. The Xbox is a component of the Microsoft dream – a life in which business and pleasure both run on Microsoft hardware and software, and in every aspect there's a cut of the profits. To quote Bill Gates, the aim is: "To get a workstation running our software onto every desk and eventually in every home." It would be wrong to call the Xbox 360 a workstation – but it's certainly serving that function of getting Microsoft software into the home.

Perhaps that's too sensationalistic, too in line with the perceptions of Microsoft as a monopolistic behemoth ruling worldwide operations with an iron fist. But the company itself does little to counteract such ideas. Europe, for example, is a crucial market for Microsoft in at least two respects – a large amount of its established franchises come from European developers, and it is currently the largest market in the world for console sales. It's all the more baffling, therefore, that the European arm of Microsoft seems to have so little autonomy from big brother back home. In the course of preparing this article, we requested an interview with Microsoft's executive director of game studios Shane Kim, to give the company's response to some of the points above. The situation dragged on for two weeks, a time for the interview was offered and then retracted, and with one teeth-skinning day to go before deadline we were told that Kim wasn't available 'at all', leading to our interview with Spencer. Ultimately, no senior figure at Microsoft was willing to come out fighting on behalf of the Xbox 360 console hardware itself, a situation that does not breed confidence in its vision.

Despite that, the 360 still has a lot going for it. The software, the online service, and the support it has attracted from the development community all deserve praise. Christmas 2008 should see *Alan Wake*, *Banjo-Threeie*, *Fable 2*, *Gears Of War 2*, *Halo Chronicles*, *Halo Wars* and *Too Human* at the least – a lineup that is hardly anaemic. And perhaps most importantly there is a perception that Microsoft is a real challenger to Sony this time around, an opponent that is not only worthy of respect but capable of taking a significant chunk of the PlayStation's business while further establishing the Xbox brand.

But it seems doubtful that, while it retains the trademarks of Microsoft's business strategy, Xbox can become the dominant force in the videogame industry. Microsoft's size and financial investment established the Xbox as a viable player in the videogame market, but these corporate policies ultimately limit its capabilities, and will limit those of any successor, in comparison to the PS3. This won't change. But now that consumers have a choice from a generation of systems that has become established, Microsoft might recall the words of its own Cortana when thinking about its system's capabilities and accessibility: "They let me pick. Did I ever tell you that?"

Spencer on MS's ongoing efforts to source IP: "We found *Mass Effect* back when it was something else and just a piece of paper"



There's no doubt that Live has played a big part in the 360's success. How many gamers with both a 360 and PS3 will buy a title like *Burnout Paradise* for the former because of the friends lists?

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN
SOLDIER AND HIT MAN,
RIGHT AND WRONG,
FRIEND AND SHIELD,
A SALARY AND A GOLD MINE
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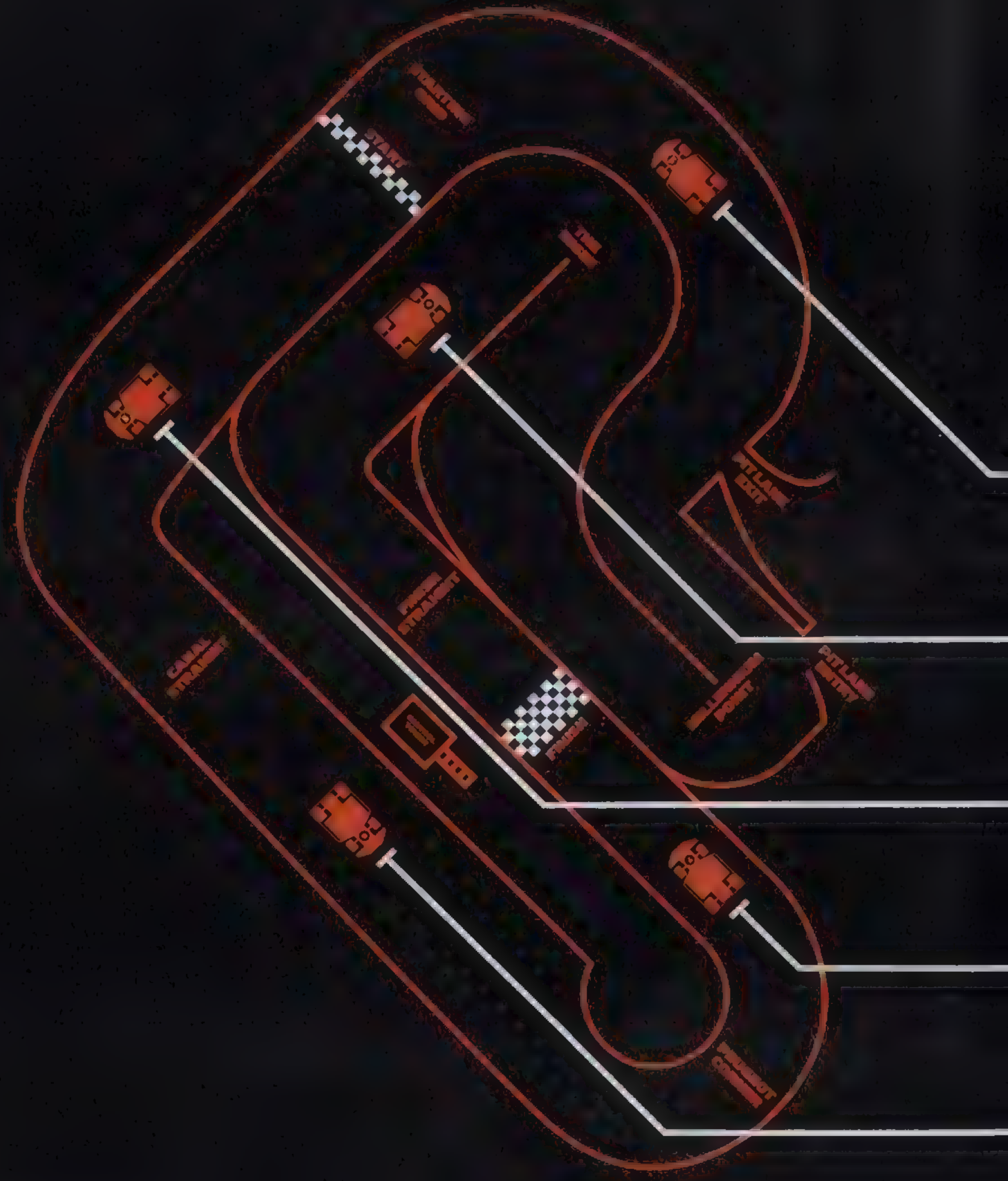
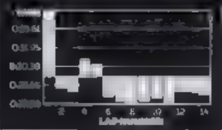
COMBAT. CAMARADERIE. CASH.
XBOX 360 LIVE
PLAYSTATION 3
ARMY OF TWO


START
PIT LANE EXIT
CANAL STRAIGHT
FINISH
PIT LANE ENTRY

MARQUED MEN

IS RACING GAMING ON ITS LAST LAP? THE MAKERS OF SEGA RALLY, PGR, MOTORSTORM AND DIRT TELL ALL

GUY WILDAY
SEGA RACING STUDIO



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NIGEL KERSHAW
EVOLUTION STUDIOS

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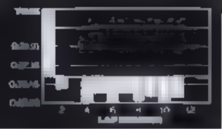
GAVIN RAEBURN
CODEMASTERS



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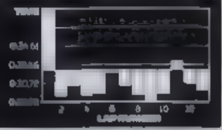
GARETH WILSON
BIZARRE CREATIONS



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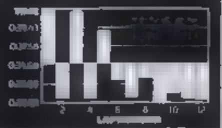
GED TALBOT
BIZARRE CREATIONS



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Impossibly shiny cars, breathtaking speed, blue skies and roaring engines: racers were once videogaming's ultimate expression of realism crossed with escapist fantasy. But while other genres have rapidly evolved, from the thunder and bluster of modern FPSes to the vast scope of RPGs, racers seem stuck in the same old routine of race upon tournament. Even the biggest sellers don't seem to be performing as well as they used to: once a perennial fixture at the very top of the UK Christmas chart, *Need For Speed* managed only fifth place as 2007 turned to 2008. Buried in the blizzard of last year's big releases, *Project Gotham Racing 4* has failed to ignite the same fervour as its predecessors. And can *Gran Turismo*'s lustre really sell PS3 the same way it once did PS1 and PS2?

And yet a few titles are breaking out of the mould, incorporating new ways of presenting races and multiplayer experiences, and hinting at how the genre can reinvent itself. To see how they view their place in videogaming and what challenges lie ahead, we went karting with **Nigel Kershaw**, game director at *MotorStorm* maker Evolution Studios, **Gareth Wilson** and **Gerard Talbot**, lead designers on the *Project Gotham* series at Bizarre Creations, **Guy Wilday**, studio director at Sega Racing Studio, and **Gavin Raeburn**, executive producer on Codemasters' *Dirt* and the forthcoming *Race Driver: Grid*.

Which racing game do you most respect right now?

Raeburn: *Test Drive Unlimited*. I'm still playing and really enjoying it. It's not really a racing game, more of a driving game, but even though what you're doing is pretty much the same as any racing game, it's packaged in a much more authentic way. In a traditional racing game it's mode after mode – *Test Drive* presents things in a more encompassing and believable way.

Wilson: The start, when you're queuing up for the plane to go to Hawaii, that's excellent – you do feel that you're this person that's gone on the plane, bought a house, a car.

Talbot: One of the funny things about that game is it is set as a big multiplayer racing game but I don't think I ever tried the multiplayer – you'd see people, it's an online persistent world, though I didn't actually play anyone.

Kershaw: I suppose it's an early prototype of what persistent racing could be. It never came off as well as it ought to have done.

Raeburn: You were encouraged to play multiplayer, but you didn't have to.

You mention the importance of *Test Drive*'s presentation – how crucial do you think it is in terms of developing the genre?

Raeburn: It helps give a structure; it gives what you do a meaning. If you compare *Burnout Paradise* to the older ones, what you're basically doing is similar but the open world adds a whole new dimension. It's certainly something that I'd like to push with our future racing games.

Talbot: 'Why am I doing this?' comes up in design meetings a lot, and it's a real hard one.

Wilday: It's fundamental, isn't it? You focus your efforts on making the gameplay experience during the races, and you've got to come away from them feeling that that was what you enjoyed. Obviously, in *Sega Rally* we focused on the whole deformation thing more than anything else. Progression, or the reason to play on, is with game modes and challenge from online, but I think the driving has got to be right first.

Does that mean simulation is still a really important consideration?

Talbot: I think racing games are stuck between two groups. On one side is the sports sim, the *Forzas* and the *Gran Turismos* and *Race Drivers*. On the other there's arcade racers, the *MotorStorms*, *Sega Rallys*.

Kershaw: Yeah, we found that with *World Rally Championship*. It was trying to be a simulation, and it never broke into the mass market. While the race fans loved it, they're only a small subset of what you can sell a good game to.

Talbot: Most people don't like racing games.

Kershaw: They just want something that's fun, that gives you the adrenaline rush.

Wilday: Do you not think that these things are cyclical, though? For me there was a period where that motorsports thing was it. It was what everyone wanted and played. I think that they then grew tired of it and wanted something else, and at the moment we're definitely at a point where racing games are trying to do something different – more fantasy based, less realistic – more entertaining, in a sense. I don't know, but I can see it going full circle.

Kershaw: The realism thing isn't so much the issue any more. Our handling models are as realistic as we want them to be. We're not trying to make someone be a rally driver, we're going through the motions and giving them the perception of being one without having to be that good at it. It's about creating emotion and feeling rather than simulation.

Raeburn: It's about being a good driver without having the pain, but people don't want to know that when they're playing.

Test Drive Unlimited's open environment serves as both racetrack and backdrop to races, online multiplayer and shops, and presents a new way to present a game [illegible]

The latest *Sega Rally*, made by Sega Racing Studio, neatly updated a much-loved series with [illegible]

Featuring licensed cars from the World Rally Championship and authentic courses taken from satellite imagery, Evolution Studios' WRC had always been about [illegible]

We know *Grand Theft Auto* isn't necessarily a racing game, but many of us [illegible] *Vice City* and *San Andreas* [illegible]

Kershaw: Yeah, absolutely, you've always got to pander to that hardcore market, that vocal subset that's into suspension settings and how much your tyres are toed in.

But *Gran Turismo* is still being sold as the Real Driving Simulator – it's still seen as an ideal.

Talbot: I think that when it comes down to it, racing is a sport. Our history leads us to realistic racing.

Raeburn: All the research we've done says that hardcore simulators are selling less and less. I wouldn't call *Gran Turismo* a racing simulator. It's more like collecting cars.

Kershaw: Car porn. It's aspirational.

Wilson: Cars are desirable objects and most people will never get to drive a Lamborghini. So if they can get close in a game, that's satisfying some inner need. But we all simulate – underlying *Gotham* is a proper physics engine. We spent all our time trying to unmake it for the game.

Kershaw: Exactly the same with *MotorStorm* – we've got a pretty realistic handling model, but we detune it to get it to do what we want it to do.

Because you need your game to appeal to the greatest number of people possible.

Wilson: Actually, I kind of fear for racing games in the future. Look at last year – there's been so many quality games that aren't racing games. Even me, as a racing game lover, there's a lot of good games I'd buy ahead of pretty much any of them, even though there's been quality there, too. I do worry that it might become an extremely niche area unless we work out a way of making it become more massmarket.

Wilday: You're right, I completely agree, and it's throwing down a challenge to us that we've got to up our game.

Wilson: The focus for our new title for Activision is: how can we make a really, really big-selling racing game, something that people will buy over *Call Of Duty 5*?

Talbot: I was talking to a friend recently and he said that he didn't know why he should play all these other racing games when there's *Grand Theft Auto*. I said that *GTA* isn't really a racing game, and in fact the driving isn't as good as most racing games. He was, like, "Well, you get to do all these other things as well".

Burnout Paradise and Test Drive have now played with the idea of driving in an open world, like GTA. How do you think it's been working?
Raeburn: It needs refining a bit. But *GTA* isn't just a sandbox, and nor is *Test Drive*. It's linear missions that you can explore but have control over doing.
Wilday: But the perception of the player is that it's completely open-ended and that they can do what they like.
Wilson: It's very hard to design circuits – you lose a certain amount of racing in a free environment. ***Test Drive* is a really good game, but the driving would never really compete with a circuit racer.** I think *Burnout* has tried by making a load of circuits in an open world, but you don't get things like turn markers. Me and Ged spent hours in every circuit in *PGR* making sure every apex and turn marker is right, but you can't do that in an open-world racer because you don't know where they're going to turn. Immediately it becomes more of a driving game than a racing game. But then your average gamer isn't that bothered, and that's why they're happy with *GTA*, even if you'll unfairly fail a race by missing that checkpoint, hitting that lamppost.

Raeburn: It's all very hard to do with a circuit racer. **If you have licensed circuits and championships, it totally dictates the structure you can have.**

Wilson: Can I ask a question, actually, about *Dirt*? Traditionally, *Colin McRae* games have sold well in Europe but not the US, and it seems like *Dirt* has done really well in the US – why?

Raeburn: It's got a lot more American content, and it was definitely geared for there.

Kershaw: They really don't get rally driving. You didn't push the rally driving side.

Raeburn: It looks a lot like *MotorStorm* – you've got off-road segments, damage, and that's what we pushed. You've got to sell stuff that people want to buy into, but damage, crashing, maiming – that's what people like. It's hard to sell 'being a racing driver'.

Wilson: A lot of people don't want to be racing drivers.

Kershaw: Americans have a very different attitude to their racing drivers – look at Nascar. They're all country heroes, and people in the northern states think they're hicks. But it's a good spectator sport – I worked on the *IndyCar* series which is about turning left for 200 laps, but it's great to watch because you get the spectacle of people crashing and you can see the whole track. But to actually play it – I actually fell asleep when I was tuning the game.

Wilson: But the crashing is good.

Kershaw: Yeah, but the thing is that **crashing is the best part of motorsports, but in games it's a negative.** We tried to address it by making the crashes look really nice in *MotorStorm*, and *Burnout* did really well to exploit it with aftertouch and Crash Mode.

There's a lot of variety in today's racing games – *Dirt* features many different events and cars.

Raeburn: But you've got to be really careful – variety is a dangerous thing. In one of the *Race Drivers* we had lawnmowers but only because we had a deal with Honda and got money for it. It was supposed to be hidden away, but it got out and it got into every review of the game, and it's not necessarily what people want to do.

Wilday: Going back to *Gran Turismo*, it's a value-for-money proposition – all those cars. For me, the reason why *Forza 2*'s been selling so well is that it's a good deal for all the content you're getting. With the different distribution methods you have now it's going to be very important to consider how you launch and at what price. But if you have a well-balanced, well-put-together arcade racer and you're competing with these games with a lot of content, it's tough.

Raeburn: It's what you do with the content as well. **In *Gran Turismo* the cars are a bit disposable – you don't get to see them all, and that's a bit of a shame.**

Wilday: But I don't think it's important to players that they don't see all the cars.

Talbot: But with something like *Need For Speed*, there aren't many cars at all.

Wilson: There are some games that can sell on the premise alone, and *Need For Speed* nailed that. I don't know how well the franchise will continue…

Kershaw: I think it's tailing.

Wilson: And in *Pro Street* they've dropped straight into *Gotham* and *Race Driver* territory – simmy arcadey stuff. It's strange. It was a hugely successful brand.

Going back to the point about downloadable content, can you see yourselves ever creating one game for a long period that's supported by lots of new content?

Talbot: I hope not.

Raeburn: Why would you have that? Look at movies – you don't have one movie about war, you have loads of different takes on it.

Wilson: There are always new takes on racing, though there's also room for downloadable content.

Raeburn: Look around the table – we're all making very different racing games. We're getting fewer and fewer, but the ones left are getting bigger and better and getting more sales.

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Gran Turismo 5 Prologue continues the [illegible]

One of PS3's launch titles, *MotorStorm* [illegible]

PGR3's exquisite in-car views set new standards for [illegible]

Following *Test Drive*'s experiments in open [illegible]

but the small fry are disappearing.
Talbot: It's like the *Gran Turismo* thing – we can all respect what it did, especially at the beginning, and what it turned into. But everyone's looking for the next thing. We've seen *Forza*'s take on it, and some people are already asking what the next thing is going to be. Looking around this table, **I don't think that any of us are completely happy with our tech, visuals, gameplay.** Especially visuals.

What, in a technical sense, would you like to achieve next? Are you focused on graphics, or can new tech add to the driving simulation side?
Talbot: The physics side is just about interpretation. A large part is premise and content – these will change and have changed a lot. We're putting characters into the games.
Kershaw: AI opponents. Not in terms of them getting better but them being more interesting, acting along what the Hollywood script of a racing game would be, or make interesting emergent events happen more often, or better. That's where a lot of our effort is.
Talbot: I think there's still space for the simulator. I think it's about the nitty-gritty – the visuals. There's a lot more to do.
Wilson: That reminds me, one thing that was good about *Pro Street* was the smoke. That was good.
Raeburn: One thing we've really pushed in *Grid* is particles and getting shit on to the screen. You're racing around a track, and a lot of track racing games seem very lifeless. You want to get particles and smoke just hanging in the air.
Wilson: If you've ever been to a proper race day the smoke and the noise is unbelievable and I still don't think we've captured that.
Raeburn: You go and record cars on the track but it doesn't capture what it's really like. You feel it in your chest, and it's hard replicating that.
Wilday: The home cinema thing – hi-def and surround sound – is driving that technology up and gives a better opportunity to start getting that sound out of a basic 5.1 system.
Raeburn: Though we've had tests of our games with team members taking them home and we find that they've got speakers pointing at the ceiling and configurations wrong.
Wilday: One of the big things you get when you're driving in real life is the feedback.
Kershaw: We'll never achieve it in games.

Wilday: Well, you say that, but rumble is now a standard, which is giving some information back. That's a big area for feeding back what's happening because it's such a big part of driving.
Wilson: There's that force feedback bodysuit thing made at MIT.
Kershaw: We need something like that to make racing games more realistic.
Raeburn: There's force feedback on sticks.
Talbot: Force feedback steering wheels are good, but not many people use them. It's a shame, really. It's a big thing, though, and not many casual players are going to buy it.
Wilday: It's interesting what the supercar makers are doing with their cars. Ferrari have got this little switch on some of their steering wheels that allows inexperienced drivers to pull off stylish driving techniques like drifting.
Wilson: It's fuelling the whole aspirational side of cars. And racing games are a great thing for car manufacturers for that.

Your games epitomise what supercars are to most people.
Talbot: We're interactive Top Gear, that's what we've become to a lot of people, especially *Gran Turismo*. How many times have we heard people saying that they've tuned up their VW Beetle to 1,000 horsepower, but it won't go around corners? They're allowing people to have these experiences. But in some ways, technically we're right at the beginning. The new deformation stuff that was in *Sega Rally*. The collisions in *Dirt* – it felt like hitting things. And these things will become standard. Persistent skid marks have become standard.
Wilson: The in-car view when we did *PGR 3* – we had to convince everyone that it should be included because the poly-count and all that was huge. And now it seems that to have a professional simulator, you have to have this in-car view, or photo mode. *Gran Turismo* started that.
Wilday: And everyone knows it has to look as good as yours.
Raeburn: That's what I say to the team: if you're going to put it in, make sure it looks better than what you see elsewhere. It's interesting what you said about cockpit view – we were considering it for *Dirt*, and the branding department demanded that it should go in.
Wilson: Every time a new game comes out we think, oh God, we've got to get all this into our game, too. We're really pushing at the limits of technology with racing games.

These rally games don't sell outside Europe [illegible]

Part of a lineage that began with the TOCA [illegible]

Kershaw: Yeah, getting things moving as fast as they need to be, and on the multiplayer side the challenges are huge. In an FPS players might have moved five feet in a second; in a racing game they may have moved 50 or more.
Raeburn: And streaming worlds with fast cars is very difficult. *Call Of Duty 4* apparently had fewer polygons than its predecessor but it has bump mapping and all that to make it look good. You can't do that with a car. It just has to have that detail.

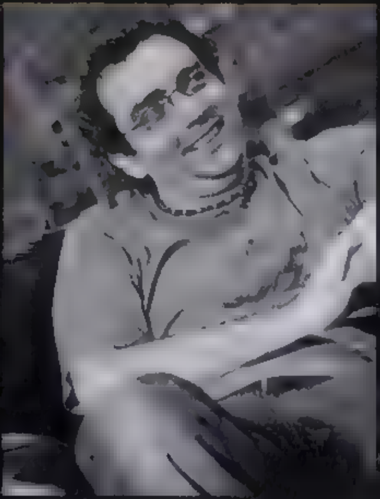
How are you looking at multiplayer at the moment?
Kershaw: A lot of people are actually worried about playing online. People kick my arse at *MotorStorm*. I can't even compete. But it gives you that longevity, which is good for the downloadable content we're selling.
Raeburn: And you don't just want a hardcore crew playing it after a year. That's why you need grading and different levels. And it needs to be transparent, like *Test Drive* – you need to almost just stumble on a race. You shouldn't need to go to separate lobbies.
Wilson: When we were working on *Gotham*, Microsoft gave us some very detailed statistics on who played online and when. The vast majority of Europeans played in unranked custom games, and the vast majority of Americans played in ranked competitive games. I think if you want to appeal to the American audience you have to go for aggressive multiplayer, though it does tend to put off the Europeans and Japanese, who want this inclusive team-type stuff.
Wilson: Particularly in racing, people are so downright dirty online. In *Gotham* we have terrible trouble with people deliberately bashing into people, stopping in the middle of the road, working in pairs.
Raeburn: I found that too in *Gotham*, and it's the same for *Race Driver* of old – there's that fear of the first corner.

Everyone backs off because the first one through will be shunted. It really ruins the experience.
Talbot: You can do what *Burnout* did and encourage it.
Raeburn: You can reduce shunting strength, or increase damage to shunters. It's artificial stuff that you don't really want to do, or add rules – penalties – but that can frustrate people as well.
Talbot: We had a funny one with *PGR4* – originally motorbike riders weren't able to fall off because we thought players would think it unfair, but it was the opposite – they wanted to, even though their race would be ruined. We had to say: "OK, it's your game!"

If the market for racing games is getting smaller because people are getting what they want from the idea of driving cars around in *GTA*, do you feel optimistic about the genre's future?
Wilday: I think, fundamentally, racing fast cars is fun, and people are always going to aspire to doing it. There are other aspirational gaming experiences, of course, and we've got to continue to compete with creating compelling games that will do that. We've got to innovate, because that's what they're doing in other genres.
Wilson: **It's almost as if racing games have gotten away with not innovating for a long time.** If you look at the singleplayer structures of the games that the people around this table have been creating, they're very similar in design to what was done ten years ago. The challenge is to create a really compelling premise and world in the way that other genres have, and move on. We've always fallen back on our graphics and technology, but it's really how the story unfolds and who you are as a person, and how that progresses is the thing that racing games need to catch up on.
Kershaw: We need to take more risks.
Talbot: I certainly want to play the next racing game. I'll play them all, because I like them, not just because I'm a designer.
Kershaw: Ultimately, racing games are a niche, but a really large one. And occasionally *Need For Speed* or *Gran Turismo* will break out of the niche and go absolutely massive.
Wilson: They're 12 per cent of sales, aren't they?
Raeburn: Yeah, in the US. And if there are only five or six big sellers, that's a lot of money.

Turn 10's 'simulation'-driven *Forza* games [illegible]

EA's *Need For Speed* series utilises the [illegible]



REEL GAMING

HOW GAMES ARE INVADING THE BIG SCREEN, AGAIN

Even before Hollywood's screenwriters went on strike, Tinseltown was desperate for new ideas. Having translated most popular comic book characters, and even niche superheroes, to the big screen multiple times through reboots and sequels, videogames have become the 'new comics' in Los Angeles.

Despite the majority of videogame translations tanking at the box office, including high-profile $70 million potential blockbusters like Doom and everything controversial independent filmmaker Uwe Boll has done (most recently the $60 million star-studded fantasy film In The Name Of The King: A Dungeon Siege Tale), Hollywood continues to license videogames in the hopes of capturing a global audience of gamers.

What Hollywood has been oblivious to over the years, perhaps focusing more on the few box office hits like Mortal

The fact that BloodRayne picked up six Golden Raspberries didn't stop Uwe Boll churning out a sequel, this time with Natassia Malthe as Rayne

[illegible]

From the very early days of Hollywood exploration of videogames as fodder for movie franchises, the misses like Double Dragon and Street Fighter: The Movie far outweighed the successes. The question remains, especially when you look at how well Hollywood has done with comic book adaptations like Spider-Man and Batman Begins, why it's been so hard to succeed in bringing interactive entertainment to the big screen. "Everyone in Hollywood wants to rubber-stamp stuff," explains **Larry Kasanoff**, producer of the Mortal Kombat movies. "If this game worked, that game will work; if this comic book worked, that comic book will work. It's the story and it's the property and they all have to be done separately, differently and the movie has to be incredibly well-crafted. And there has to be someone at the core of that experience who can craft it really, really well."

With the worldwide success of the *Super Mario* videogames, everyone from gamers to Disney executives felt like the movie was a sure-fire hit just waiting to hit cinemas. "I think that it was not sufficiently entertaining for a broad enough number of people," says **Nolan Bushnell**, founder of Atari. "I think a lot of successes or failures are based on expectations, and I think everybody expected it to do better and when it didn't, it was deemed a failure."

After early debacles like Super Mario Bros, in which Disney Pictures couldn't make sense of the world's most famous plumber, Hollywood has been playing catch-up with the videogame industry, according to **Steve Lisberger**, the director of another Disney film, Tron: "It's taken years for Hollywood to figure out how to mesh with videogames and comic books and it's still struggling with it, but those early days were really difficult times. I think it took a generation who grew up and accepted videogames to get into Hollywood to start to make the films feel like they were part of it."

At the core of the problem is the fact that interactive entertainment and traditional linear entertainment are very different beasts. "When I'm watching a movie, my mindset is entirely different than when I'm playing a videogame," says **Jason Hall**, founder of HDFilms and former senior vice president of Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment. "With a movie I want to sit and be led along, but when I play a game, I want to be active. I have gotten very tired racing in *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* or playing *Doom* head to head. It's intense."

Despite the success that the best-selling *Tomb Raider* had in its two Hollywood counterparts, the casting of Angelina Jolie likely had more to do with the box office numbers than the films' plots, or lack thereof. "I don't think there is any correlation between a good game and a good film," says **Neil Young**, head of EA LA. "You could have a phenomenal game and a terrible movie. You could have a phenomenal movie and a terrible game. They are very different media. Now we can borrow from each other we can use techniques that are used in other media."

But a lot has changed over the past few years, according to **Adrian Askerieh**, producer of Hitman. "I think games have progressed to the point that they now have complex stories, great characters, they're extremely cinematic," he explains. "And I think most people now in Hollywood realise that the games business is something that they want to cultivate and take advantage of. Whereas a few years ago, some people had the vision to see the potential of games but their execution was less than desired so games got a bad reputation, now I think everyone finally realises that videogames are what audiences for the event movies want to see – big characters, big stories, and big spectacles."

And that's keeping the interest of Hollywood, which means there will be plenty more movies based on games – and not just from Uwe Boll.

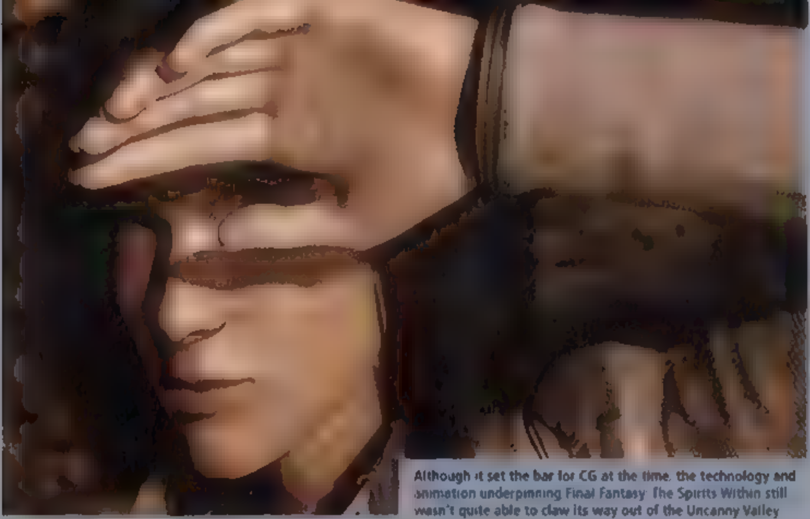
Kombat, Tomb Raider, Resident Evil, Hitman and Silent Hill than the dozens of financial failures, is that gamers can be particularly demanding consumers. While it's relatively easy to market even a bomb into an interesting premise through a 30-second trailer, gamers comb the web for every piece of information on new game releases. That's the reason bad games don't become blockbusters, but horrible movies do break $100 million at the box office. These same gamers who are so wary of spending their £40 on a new game aren't about to throw away £7 on another shoddy videogame translation.

"You need these kids to come in on a film's opening Friday, because they're texting their friends right after the movie and you no longer have until Sunday," says **Michael Cerenzie** of CP Productions, which is producing the *Joust* and *Area 51* videogame-inspired movies.

But things are changing in Hollywood, at least according to the producers involved in some of the upcoming videogame adaptations – and there are dozens of them coming soon to a cinema near you (assuming the writers' strike is resolved and that Hollywood's actors and directors don't strike in June when their contracts are up).

"The competition for intellectual properties that have any sort of market recognition is clearly fierce," says **Scott Faye**, producer of the *Max Payne* and *Alice* videogame adaptations. "If a game's relatively successful, you know you can get the attention of that fanbase, and if you broaden the film you stand the chance of at least not failing relative to expectations and budget and many other things. Videogames have matured, and it's an incredibly viable medium now for

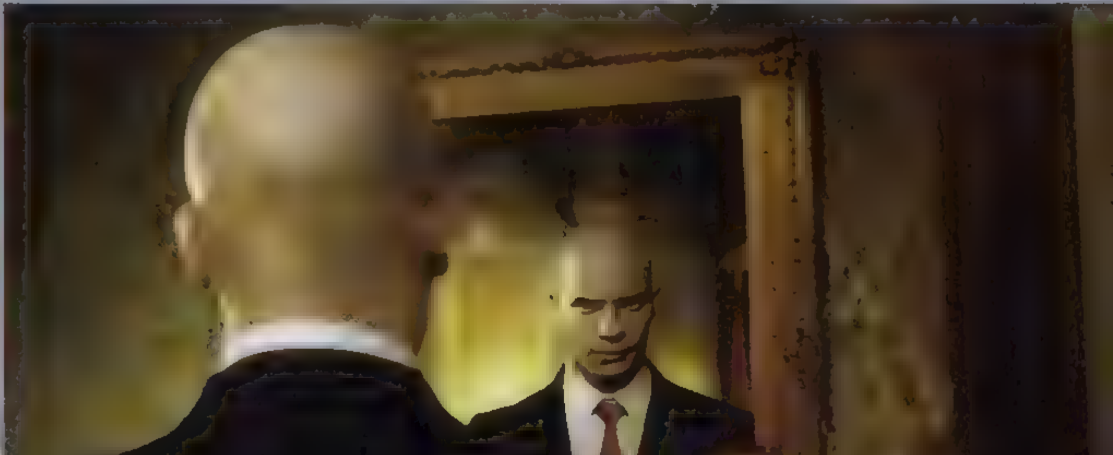
"THE COMPETITION FOR INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES THAT HAVE ANY SORT OF MARKET RECOGNITION IS CLEARLY FIERCE"



Although it set the bar for CG at the time, the technology and animation underpinning Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within still wasn't quite able to claw its way out of the Uncanny Valley

Despite the opportunity to deliver creepy thrills, Doom chose to go for mindless carnage and loud noises, with some camp turns by The Rock and Dexter Fletcher

Timothy Olyphant, despite being much loved for his (much hairier) role in Deadwood and following his performance as Bruce Willis' nemesis in Die Hard 4.0, didn't seem the natural choice as the snappily dressed but cold and calculating assassin, Agent 47, in the Hitman movie. Critics widely agreed



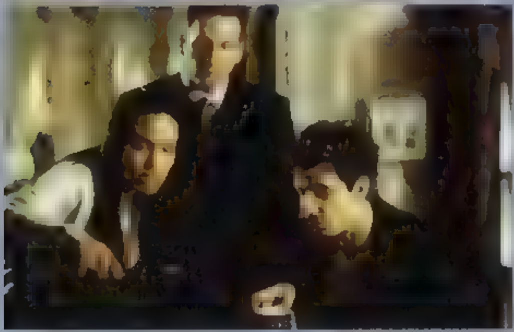
films. As games become more narrative- and character-centric, there are fewer people in Hollywood studios that can look at a game and say: 'Great, but where's the movie?'"

Just as gaming has become a global business, topping $17.9 billion (£9 billion) in the US in 2007 and nearing $40 billion (£20 billion) worldwide, more Hollywood writers, directors, producers and studio executives who have grown up gaming have assumed positions of power. In addition to finding Hollywood more receptive to games as source material for film franchises, the belief goes that these producers are more endeared to these gaming properties and less likely to butcher them into plotless action fodder.

"There is nothing more boring than seeing a movie that is a straight adaptation of a videogame," says **Paul W S Anderson**, who has had box-office success with *Mortal Kombat* and *Resident Evil* films. "A lot of hardcore gamers complain that videogame movies don't stick exactly to the games, but frankly that would not be an enjoyable experience because if you've already played the game you know what's going to happen."

It also helps that Hollywood has a short memory when it comes to box-office duds like DOA, Doom and BloodRayne. "No disrespect to DOA, but for me DOA was not really a movie and it was only released on 500 theatres," says **Adrian Askarieh**, producer of Hitman and the upcoming *Spy Hunter* and *Kane & Lynch*

Postal makes you wonder if Uwe Boll is actually some kind of comedy genius: he himself says he expects to end up in jail after making light of Auschwitz and terrorism



Tomb Raider is the most commercially successful movie adaptation to date, and holds the record for the largest opening ever for a movie headlined by a woman

movies. "Doom had a damaging effect for a limited time two years ago, but movies like Hitman and Resident Evil: Extinction are really helping more games head to the big screen. When you look at Prince Of Persia being made at Disney with Jerry Bruckheimer, I think we are absolutely in a new era for videogame movies. We're entering that period of time like comic book movies did following the success of X-Men and Spider-Man, where AAA videogame movies are now being made."

Stuart Beattie, who wrote the screenplay for New Line Cinema's adaptation of Epic Games' Gears Of War, believes it's just a matter of time before a videogame movie hits the jackpot. The original Tomb Raider has come closest, so

[illegible]

[illegible]

Based on American McGee's take on Alice In Wonderland, Sarah Michelle Gellar is no longer officially attached to this film, but Universal is.
TALENT: Producer Scott Faye and director Marcus Nispel
RELEASE: TBA
PROSPECTS: The dark game found a niche PC audience, but Faye is refining the film's script to appeal to a larger audience and feature a younger Alice

[illegible]

Christian Slater, Tara Reid and Uwe Boll are removed from this direct-to-DVD sequel, although Boll produced. Writers/directors Michael Roesch and Peter Scheerer focus on a witch-hunt in this film, which will loosely tie in to the new Atari game
TALENT: Rick Yune, Lance Henriksen, Rachel Specter and Jason Connery
RELEASE: May
PROSPECTS: Boll films do well on DVD, which prompted this low-budget sequel's greenlight. Skipping the cinema's probably not a bad idea

[illegible]

Based on Midway's sci-fi firstperson shooter franchise, Paramount Pictures has big plans for this action flick
TALENT: Comic book writer and artist Grant Morrison
[redacted]
PROSPECTS: Although the *Blacksite. Area 51* game tanked, this film has Independence Day potential if done right

[illegible]

With sales of the straight-to-DVD BloodRayne II: Deliverance still going strong, Uwe Boll plans a third and final movie set in World War II
TALENT: Boll will produce and direct, and says he'd like a new actress as Rayne
[redacted]
PROSPECTS: With each film in this trilogy taking on a different time period, this DVD should find its audience. It will also be interesting to see the film tie in to the original game

[illegible]

After the success of Silent Hill, Konami's bringing another key franchise to the big screen
TALENT: Paul W S Anderson is on board to write and produce
[redacted]
PROSPECTS: With the right talent this translation, which involves the Belmont clan and Dracula, should appeal to the massmarket, and has blockbuster franchise potential

[illegible]

NCSoft has had great success with its *City Of Heroes* and *City Of Villains* franchise, and these videogame superheroes are now heading to the big screen
TALENT: Transformers producer Tom DeSanto plans a trilogy of films based on the hit superhero MMO
RELEASE: 2010
PROSPECTS: Superheroes are hot in Hollywood and so are videogames, and this killer combo should have big names attached thanks to DeSanto's backing

[illegible]

After several failed starts, this film is currently in the garage for yet another script tune-up
TALENT: Impact Pictures' Paul W S Anderson and Jeremy Bolt have been sitting behind the wheel of this franchise for a long time
RELEASE: TBA
PROSPECTS: Depending on what happens with Vin Diesel's The Wheelman, there's potential for this adaptation, but Ubisoft will need to reinvigorate the game franchise as well

[illegible]

Sony Pictures is exploring the big-screen potential for Sony Online Entertainment's key MMO franchise
TALENT: A big-name producer is developing this project, according to SOE president John Smedley
[redacted]
PROSPECTS: *EverQuest* has a loyal following of gamers around the globe and this fantasy MMO could become a Lord Of The Rings-type franchise for Sony Pictures

[illegible]

Epic Games has already topped *Halo* in the movie licensing game, as Gears Of War has a studio in New Line Cinema and a completed script
TALENT: Stuart Beattie (Pirates Of The Caribbean) delivered the script and a director is currently being sought
RELEASE: 2009
PROSPECTS: With a *Gears Of War* game sequel expected this year, this franchise will only grow its international audience. The potential for a successful film franchise, buoyed by Beattie's script, is strong with Epic's property

[illegible]

Although Marc Ecko's game flopped, Paramount Pictures and MTV Films have optioned a film version focused on the graffiti action tale
TALENT: Writers Sean O'Keefe and Will Staples have completed the script about Trane's adventures
RELEASE: TBA
PROSPECTS: Marc Ecko has his non-gamer fashion following and MTV Films will be promoting this film to its young target demographic, which means the movie shouldn't flop like the game

[illegible]

With a lack of Sony synergy, Sony Pictures looked past Sony Computer Entertainment's interactive juggernaut and allowed Universal to cash in on this Greek action monster
TALENT: David Self (Road To Perdition) has finished the script and game creator David Jaffe has his eye on Djimon Hounsou as Kratos
RELEASE: TBA
PROSPECTS: Universal Pictures has a number of videogame movies in the works, and this best-selling game franchise, which has new PSP and PS3 iterations on the way, is its biggest – especially post-300

[illegible]

'Gladiator meets Mad Max' in this future action flick that reinvents the classic arcade game and is set in Las Vegas 25 years from now
TALENT: Producers Michael Cerenzie and Christine Peters have a completed script by Marc Gottlieb
RELEASE: 2009
PROSPECTS: With a new comic book, the movie and a new game from Midway, *Joust* could be the first classic game to succeed on the big screen

Despite poor box-office performance, Uwe Boll was able to fund films such as Alone In The Dark (top) and House Of The Dead (above) by making use of a German tax shelter. Changes in the law, and the dismal failure of *Dungeon Siege*-based film In The Name Of The King, have led Boll to declare that he would now have to scale back his budgets

far. "Hollywood likes to do what's proven," explains Beattie. "They've already proved that books work, and plays can work, and recently that comic books can work. But they've yet to have a film be as successful as, say, Spider-Man, that's based on a videogame. We had the same thing with Pirates Of The Caribbean. They didn't want to base a film from a theme-park ride. But now that it's done and it's been successful they're looking for what other theme-park rides could possibly work as films.

Many eyes are looking at Prince Of Persia to serve as that potential blockbuster that will define videogame movies and catapult the genre into a legitimate contender. **Jerry Bruckheimer**, who's not a gamer, went straight to the source after acquiring the rights to the franchise and teaming up with Disney to produce a trilogy of movies. He hired the creator of the game, **Jordan Mechner**, who had no previous background in writing movies, to tackle the script. Mechner paints a picture of Bruckheimer as a very hands-on producer who's involved in every aspect of his films. "Really, the process of making a videogame and making a movie are similar, although the scale of the movie is a lot bigger, in terms of the resources, the number of people, and the amount of money that gets spent," says Mechner. "Still, both the movie and the videogame are team projects. They both use highly skilled, trained craftsmen and the success of a project really depends on everything coming together and firing on a lot of cylinders at once."

Bruckheimer thinks that, whether a film is based on a videogame or theme-park ride, "it's always telling a great story

> **"HOLLYWOOD LIKES TO DO WHAT'S PROVEN. THEY'VE PROVED BOOKS WORK, AND PLAYS CAN WORK, AND COMIC BOOKS CAN WORK"**

Resident Evil was panned by the movie press, but a poor critical reception did little to temper its success. Paul W S Anderson gave up the directorial reins on the third film, instead having a go at other IP such as Alien Vs Predator

[illegible]

[illegible]

With the success of Hitman, Lions Gate has fast-tracked this film, acquiring it even before the game shipped to poor reviews
TALENT: Producer Adrian Askerieh has a completed script by Kyle Ward
[illegible]
PROSPECTS: Even negative reviews of the game talked positively about the great story concept, so this could work as a buddy action movie

[illegible]

Filming in Toronto this winter, after nearly ten years Max Payne is finally heading to the big screen
TALENT: Producer Scott Faye, director John Moore, writer Beau Thorne, and Mark Wahlberg in the title role
[illegible]
PROSPECTS Wahlberg has a loyal fan following and can be a solid actor, which should bring depth to this gritty action film

[illegible]

Following its Silent Hill movie, Sony Pictures is once again working with Konami on one of the most anticipated videogame adaptations outside of Neill Blomkamp's currently 'dead' *Halo* adaptation
TALENT None confirmed
[illegible]
PROSPECTS: If the right talent is assembled in front of and behind the camera, and this film is made with North American movie-goers in mind, it could be a huge hit. Then again, any film that exactly follows the storylines of any of the games would most likely bomb

[illegible]

This film is supposed to be a reboot of the franchise, rather than the third film in the series
TALENT: Producer Larry Kassanoff and his Threshold Entertainment company have been behind all things Mortal Kombat
[illegible]
PROSPECTS: After the original film was a hit, the sequel tanked, but gamers are still getting new games every year from Midway. This film has the potential to draw an audience, if only out of curiosity

[illegible]

Capcom's time-travelling warrior tale is set to film in China with the man who translated the dark *Silent Hill* for the big screen
TALENT: Producer Samuel Hadida, director Christophe Gans, screenwriters Leslie Kruger and John Collee
RELEASE: December 2009
PROSPECTS: The $70 million budget should go a long way filming in China, and the game series has a strong following around the globe

[illegible]

Uwe Boll wrote, directed, produced and stars in this movie, which has almost nothing to do with Running With Scissors' controversial shooter
TALENT: Dave Foley, Zack Ward and Verne Troyer star in this comedy
[illegible]
PROSPECTS: At screenings and film festivals around the world, this film has divided audiences down the middle. They either love it or hate it. With a much lower budget than In The Name Of The King, Postal at least has a better chance of recouping its costs

[illegible]

Jerry Bruckheimer has gone from theme-park pirates to videogame princes and brought Disney Pictures along for the ride
TALENT: Producer Bruckheimer enlisted game creator Jordan Mechner to write the script
RELEASE TBA
PROSPECTS. Bruckheimer knows blockbusters, and Mechner's involvement should ensure gamers enjoy this action flick as much as mainstream audiences. Disney has already signed on for a big-screen trilogy, and Ubisoft has new games in the works

[illegible]

After a TV series never panned out, Electronic Arts has licensed its best-selling game franchise to 20th Century Fox
TALENT: Producer John Davis has enlisted screenwriter Bryan Lynch to bring *The Sims* to the big screen
[illegible]
PROSPECTS *The Sims* certainly has its global following, as well as the largest female gaming base of any game series, but turning it into a successful movie won't be as easy as EA's game take on Fox's hit The Simpsons

[illegible]

After John Woo came in, changed the script and left, it looks like The Rock may finally be getting behind the wheel of the Interceptor
TALENT Producer Adrian Askerieh, writer/director Paul W S Anderson, and Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson
RELEASE 2009
PROSPECTS: Universal Pictures wants this to be its own James Bond-style franchise with The Rock in the driver's seat. With a big budget, the time being taken on this project should help avoid another Doom

[illegible]

Capcom is allowing Hyde Park Entertainment and 20th Century Fox to handle the movie work this time around with this new action flick
TALENT: Director Andrzej Bartkowiak, screenwriter Justin Marks, and actress Kristin Kreuk as Chun-Li
[illegible]
PROSPECTS: In what could be a new fighting franchise, Capcom has taken one of its most popular characters and built a film around her Given the success of its Resident Evil movies, this should be anything but Street Fighter: The Movie II

[illegible]

Legendary Pictures will spend over $100 million on this fantasy epic based on Blizzard Entertainment's ten-million-selling MMO game
TALENT: Producer Thomas Tull
[illegible]
PROSPECTS: Set a year before the game's timeline and featuring a new character as its hero, this blockbuster only needs a fraction of those ten million paying subscribers to fork out some money for a ticket to become the biggest game translation of all time. And it has a never-ending stream of sequels waiting from the MMO world

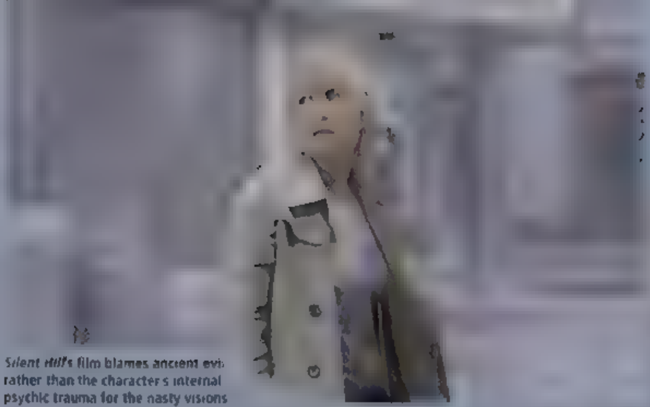
and having great characters – it's all the same. It's all about creating interesting characters, a wonderful plot and story and engaging an audience. That's the key to all of it."

"THE VIDEOGAME ADAPTATION ALLOWS WRITERS TO CREATE NEW CONTEMPORARY SCREEN HEROES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY"

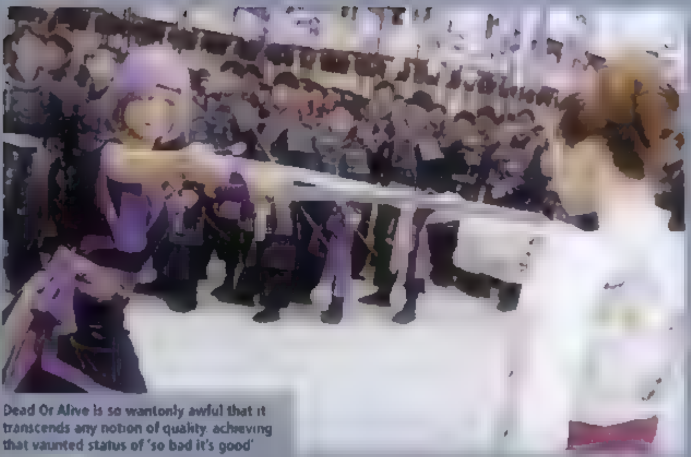
Much like the Pirates theme-park ride allowed Bruckheimer and his creators to run with new story ideas and develop a trilogy, many videogames offer that freedom to screenwriters and directors. Comic book scribe **Grant Morrison**, who wrote the script for Paramount Pictures' Area 51 adaptation, enjoyed translating Midway's sci-fi game to film. "Videogame protagonists tend to be badass military cyphers, assassins and thugs; adapting them to the big screen can be more interesting to a writer than adapting someone else's Spider-Man or Batman, where the heroes' personalities are established," says Morrison. "The videogame adaptation allows us [writers] to create new and more contemporary screen heroes for the 21st century while still enjoying the safety net of an established franchise."

With Hollywood and game adaptations going strong in both directions, as more game studios license movies and TV shows for the same reason movie studios acquire videogame rights, the two forms of entertainment are inspiring one another.

"Films like 300 and Sin City are doing a really artistic approach to storytelling," says **Cos Lazauras**, vice president of production at Halcyon Games, which is turning the new Terminator trilogy of films into games. "That becomes very inspirational to the gaming community, who for the most part are big movie fans, and that opens up all sorts of different



Silent Hill's film blames ancient evi rather than the character's internal psychic trauma for the nasty visions



Dead Or Alive is so wantonly awful that it transcends any notion of quality, achieving that vaunted status of 'so bad it's good'

Unlike many of his other films, Uwe Boll's adaptation of *Far Cry*, starring horror veteran Udo Kier, actually promises to bear some similarities with the game – not that it had a particularly stellar plot

ideas and concepts of the imagination in general. So I do think that the film space drives game design and concepts in games are inspiring Hollywood. Even when the two industries weren't together and collaborating, they inadvertently were kind of driving each other without knowing it."

That inspiration was evident to anyone who read reviews of 300 before it became an international sensation. Many movie critics, the majority of whom wouldn't know a game controller from their elbow, complained that the film's writer, director and producer **Zack Snyder**'s film looked like a videogame. But Snyder, who's an avid gamer, realises the vast differences between the two competing forms of entertainment. "At first, people in Hollywood were like: 'Games and movies are the same'," he explains. "The gameplaying experience is different from a movie. Kids who play videogames like to watch movies. And people who watch movies like to play videogames, but they're like lunch and dinner. They inform the other thing, but they don't replace it. A game can be supplementary to a movie or vice versa, but the idea of recreating the gaming experience in a film doesn't translate."

With big-budget movies in the works based on everything from *Max Payne* to *The Sims*, Hollywood isn't about to abandon the potential cash cow that games can provide. What remains to be seen is whether these new films will

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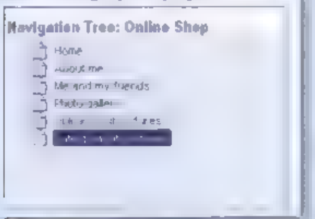

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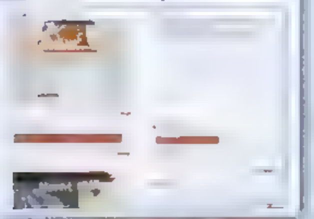

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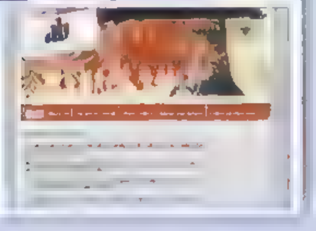

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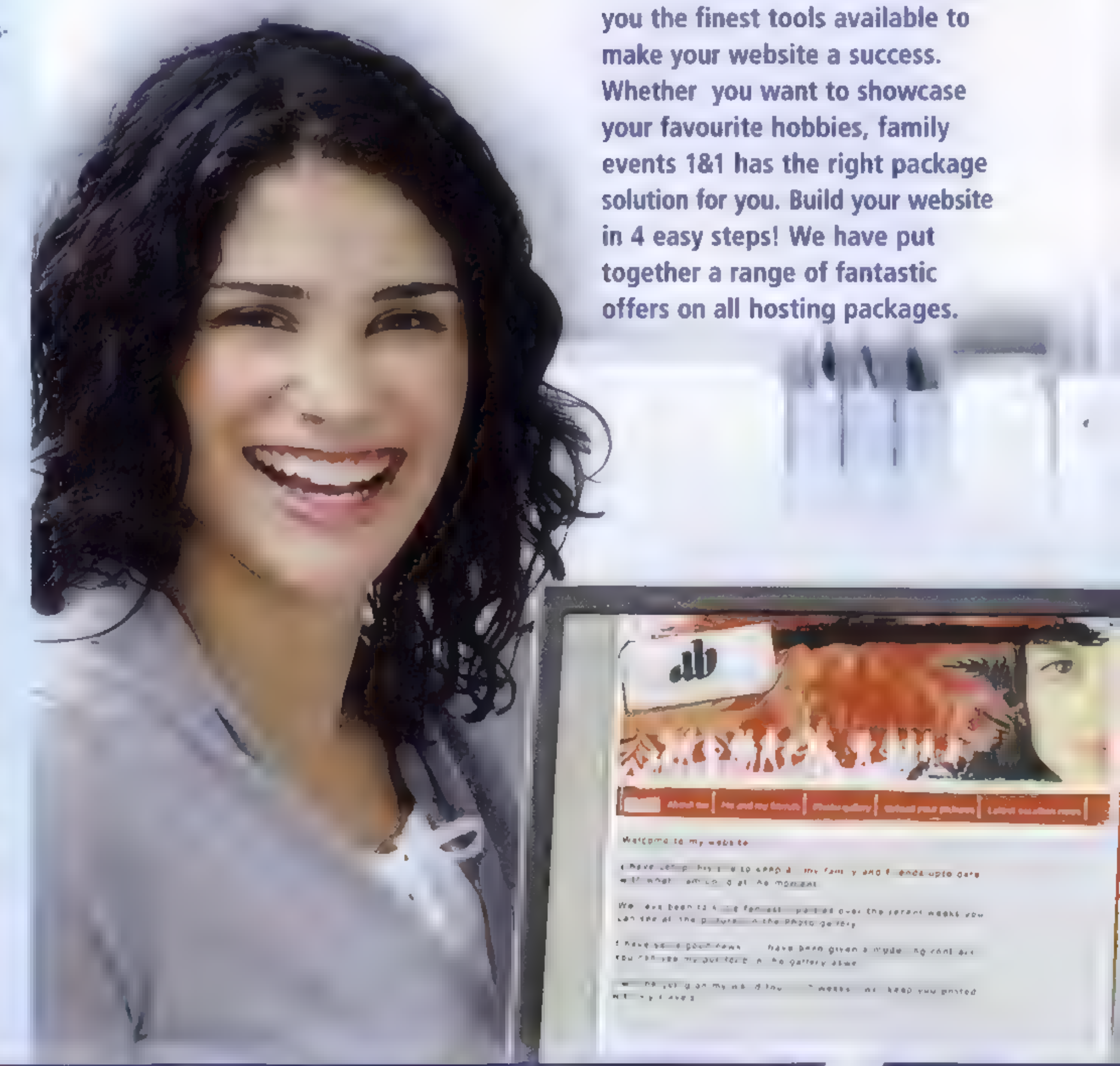

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Review

[illegible]

Edge's most played

Ghost Squad

It takes just 15 minutes of tight, vigorous pinpoint shooting before you're rewarded with a new gun and a harder level. Which leads to another 15 minutes, and another…
WII, SEGA

Super Mario World

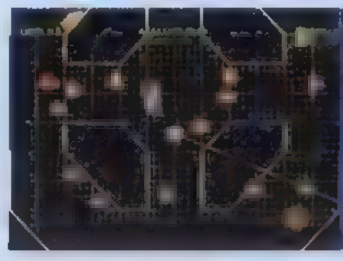
Attempting the Special Zone drunk probably isn't the way to beat it, but it still makes our jaws drop. It feels like Nintendo had as much fun designing it as we do playing
SNES, NINTENDO

Virtua Fighter 5

We've *still* not been online, but our watertight excuse is the wait for proper arcade sticks. But, oh yes, the Sega Arena Coast arcade is reeling from our winning streak.
360, SEGA

Point conversion

How can score attack stay at the top?



Geometry Wars Galaxies' drones level up through being used, meaning that the highest scores are only achievable through grinding them, rather than pure player skill. It provides longevity and appeal for newcomers, but does it misconstrue the meaning of score attack?

At first glance, it seems wrong: a score attack game mediated by adaptive difficulty. If the basic principle of score attack is that all players should work against the same bar, *Devil May Cry 4*'s moulding of its hordes of demons to player skill would seem to be sacrilege

But it's actually more proof that the era of the highest scores only being attainable through hours of learning levels and techniques by rote is past. With games in general allowing players greater freedom to act, and modifying themselves to their aptitudes to avoid difficulty bottlenecks, score attack games have had to adapt, too Few players still gladly anticipate hours of careful experimentation, thousands of deaths and a gradually increasing personal high score They now instead see in them a punishing challenge and a measly offering of levels

Adaptive difficulty is *Devil May Cry 4*'s solution to providing both the heavy challenge that players who have explored the depths of its combat system demand, and the appeal it requires among fans of *God Of War* who are looking for entertainment over trials. It only kicks in after a few deaths, garnering a heavy score penalty, to ensure the hardcore will rarely see it, while the slash-happy masses can cheerfully bludgeon their way through without having to change their difficulty settings. The only problem are middle-ground players, for whom adaptive difficulty precludes their chance to learn how to beat the harder foes.

Ghost Squad, perhaps a more traditional score attack game than *Devil May Cry*, approaches the issue in another way. Its three levels contain multiple routes to offer great variety, and the difficulty increases with each playthrough Harder enemies combined with greater player skill and knowledge of the levels leads to increasing scores, and yet the game the players play is gradually changing too, in line with their experience.

These are just two examples of a new attitude developers are bringing to a tradition gaming has had for almost all of its history. With most current games offering online connectivity, score attack has become even more pervasive and potentially gratifying, and that means that it's never been more important that designers up their game to broaden its appeal.

90 Devil May Cry 4
[illegible]

[illegible] Turok
360, PC, PS3

94 Frontlines. Fuel Of War
[illegible]

95 Conflict: Denied Ops
360, PC, PS3

96 Dynasty Warriors 6
[illegible]

97 Advance Wars: Days Of Ruin
DS

99 Patapon
PSP

100 Trauma Centre: New Blood
Wii

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360

101 Yuusha No Kuse Ni Namaikida
PSP

101 PixelJunk Monsters
PS3

102 Beautiful Katamari
360

102 Omega Five
360

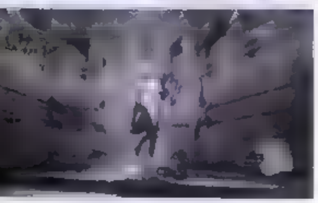
103 Sonic Rivals 2
PSP

103 Riff: Everyday Shooter
PS3

Edge [illegible]

DEVIL MAY CRY 4

360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E[illegible], E177, E184, E185



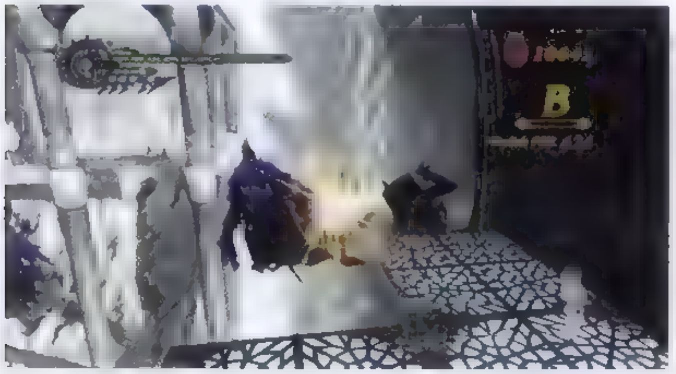
Sparring stations are scattered throughout the game, demanding ever-higher combo grades before they finally cough up artefacts. The mix of tutorial, opportunity and objective in *DMC4* is so cunning it's sure to breed a whole new generation of Dantologists

On paper, *Devil May Cry 4* looks like something horrible: a bloated spectacle for the *God Of War* crowd, full of maladjustments, contrivances and enough self-loathing to push Dante, its dazzling hero, completely out of frame. Who is this Nero, with his fresh face and demonic arm, automating the very processes that make *DMC* so clever? How dare he vault effortlessly, at the touch of a button, over the heads of his enemies, racking up combos with nary a thought for distance or defence?

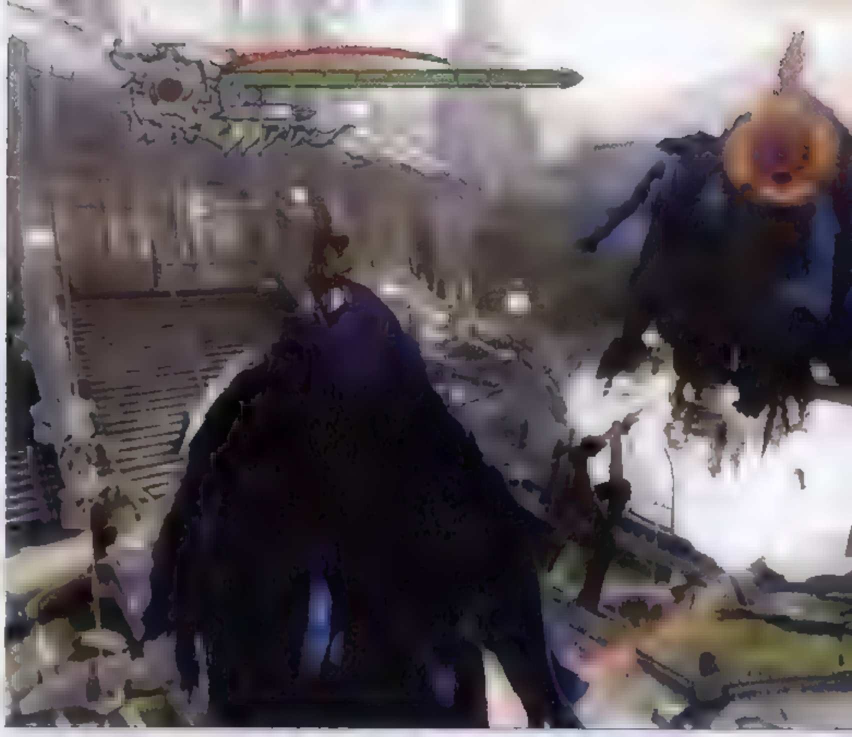
The truth is complicated, particularly because all of the above (bar the horrible bit) are true to a degree. In a bid to rescue his beloved Kyrie (pronounced K[illegible]yay), a winsome opera singer abducted just as he was getting somewhere, Nero literally flies through a game that's more lenient, streamlined and accessible than any of its predecessors. More like Kratos than Dante, his role is to reach out, through an initially rather cheap grapple technique, to players who think a Crazy Combo comes with fries and a fizzy drink.

Why? Because this is a series with a problem, not that you might think it. The better it gets, the fewer people can enjoy it.

More like Kratos than Dante, Nero's role is to reach out to players who think a Crazy Combo comes with fries and a fizzy drink



Genuinely flawed moments are rare, *DMC*'s infamous camera given few opportunities to properly screw up. The above set-piece, where Nero has to skip between vanishing panels, is the only jarring example



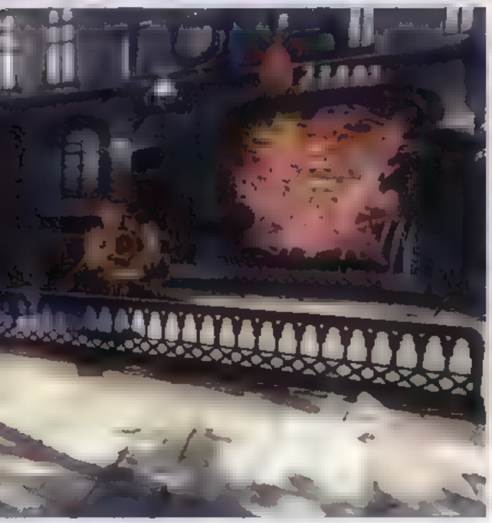
Top: insect weaklings cloaked in dark matter, Mephistos and Fausts can be tricky customers, hanging aloft before swooping in with cheap attacks. Above: Dante's presence is explained by a brief flashback to his *Devil May Cry* hangout. The cutscenes are spectacular, however, both in their tone and technology

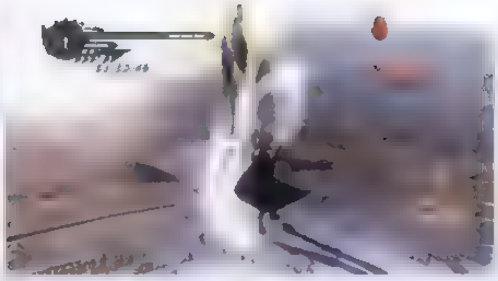
The more it allows Dante to get drunk on his own skill, the more it plays solely into the hands of the most dedicated, talented players. And the niche can only get so small. Given that Dante alienates everyone but his fans while being essential to *DMC*, Nero has become a necessity himself. His half of this 20-level epic can be enjoyed without any prior experience. His job is to make a Dante fan out of everyone.

So much of this game is surprising that you may as well put spoiler tags around the lot, but some things you can take for granted. Underground laboratories hide beneath a castle, for example, the corridors of which are stalked by possessed suits of armour and weird concoctions of guts and metal. Spectral energy and synthetic rock music still conspire to make everything feel like a disco, even under candlelight and the gazes of gargoyles. And if you're not a pantomime freak, you don't get any dialogue.

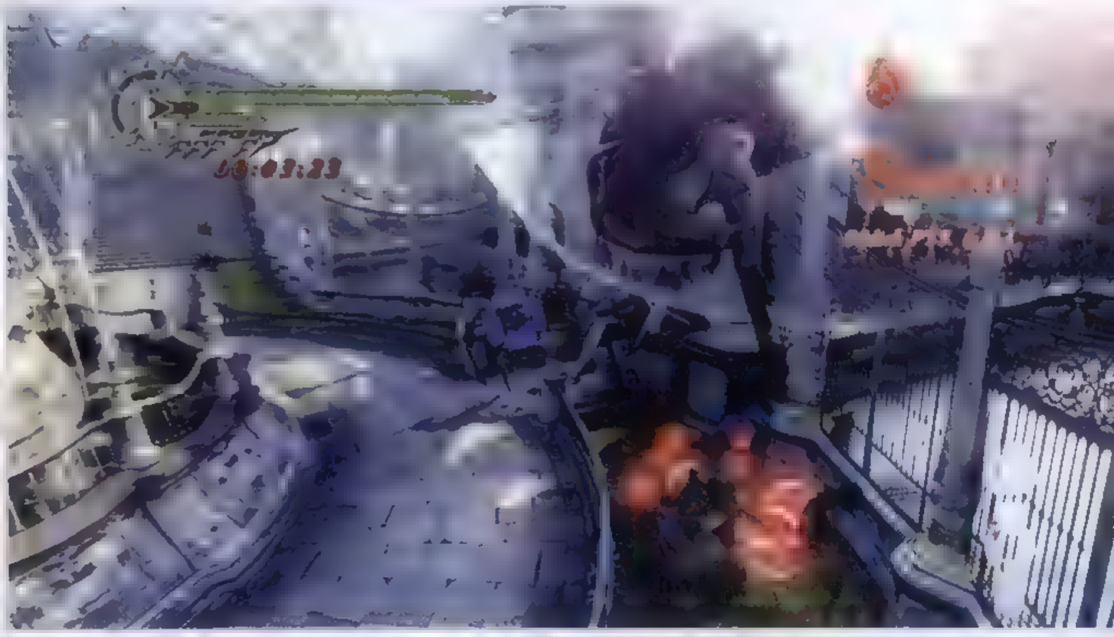
Despite Capcom's reticence, it's common knowledge that Dante does become playable, butting heads with Nero in one of the greatest boss battles ever and retaining all four of his *DMC3* styles: Gunslinger, Sword Master, Royal Guard and Trickster. You should also know that his half of the game, which is faster-paced, is also a reverse trip through levels you've already played. Don't get upset: the spoiler would be to tell you why this isn't a problem and how ingeniously the levels are reinvigorated, both in strategy and tone.

But the two halves – those two mentalities behind Dante and Nero – aren't always complementary. Most baffling is the game's use of enforced adaptive difficulty, not optional like in *DMC3* but woven inextricably into the scoring system. Fail just a few times and things get easier, the enemy types changing while bosses become weaker. A warm gesture, perhaps, in a game built not just to be enjoyed by all, but completed. But it's overzealous, altering the game before you've ever had a chance to adapt yourself, stripping away that traditional sense of achievement. Did you win or did the game

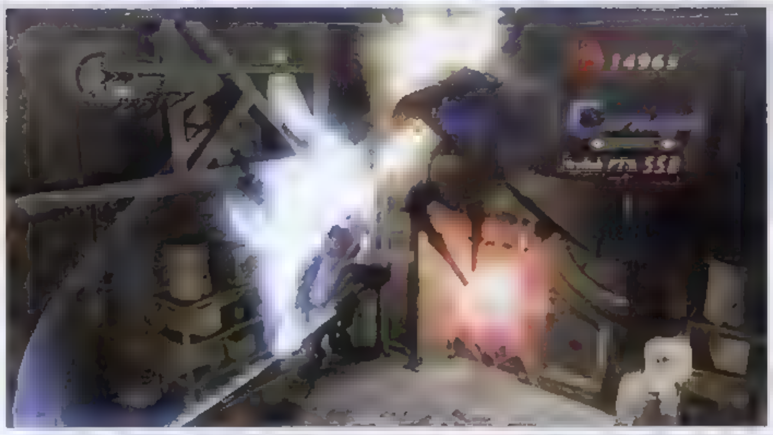




Completion unlocks, among art galleries and character profiles, a survival mode called Blood XXX. It forgoes immediate difficulty for a more gradual curve, leaving early space for combo-chasing and time-trialling. Later stages toy with different groups of enemies, showing just how finely tuned the combat can be



Thanks to Nero's treasure-sensing arm, the secret missions are barely secret at all. But they can be hugely tricky: victory conditions include time limits and sustained air time



Smashing between A (Atomic) and upper S (Smokin') grades takes variety as well as perfect defence. Nero's Exceed gauge can be discharged to devastating effect when surrounded, just as Devil Trigger specials can send combos to the roof and back

take pity? Unless you're either exceptionally good or bad, you never know for sure.

In a game so disparate in its ambitions, deciding which are important, which are adequately achieved and who is likely to benefit can be an ordeal. But if Capcom's true goal was to deliver Dante to those who never knew they needed him – or could control him – then *DMC4* is a massive success. Nero passes the baton at just the right time, his own learning curve enough to whet appetites for Dante's more intricate score attacks. And because both characters' upgrade systems are entirely flexible – skill orbs can be refunded and re-spent at leisure, persisting across all game modes and difficulty levels – there's a sense of ownership which breeds perseverance.

Just as well, because *DMC*, with its intangible rewards and arcane grading system, is still a tough sell. This new game might act like a mainstream hack-and-slash, throwing its technological weight around, tutoring newcomers and bombarding you with cutscenes and special effects, but the superficialities soon flake off, exposing that all-important score attack. Fear not, students of Dantology: the internet will again be checked, tactics will be exchanged, and every character, enemy, attack and environment will be put beneath the microscope.

That *DMC4* stands up to such scrutiny even where Nero's concerned is all that should really matter. As the game ends and its hard-earned crowd of casual players departs, it throws off its disguise and gets back to the old routine, a realtime style-score (numbers, not letters) sneaking back on to the HUD for repeat players. Its adventuring aspects, backtracking included, still jar slightly with the needs of a time trial, but otherwise its levels beg to be replayed.

In a tricky situation, forced to make a game even Bagpuss could complete, Capcom has pulled off the impossible. *DMC4* is not the grotesque misstep it so easily could have been. *DMC4* is hardcore. **[8]**

Notoriously BIG

They may dominate the screen but, once the adaptive difficulty kicks in, bosses become more like deputy bosses, then like blind, malnourished deputy bosses if you keep having to restart. None of this detracts from their visual appeal, and yet again Capcom proves itself the master of the comic macabre, not to mention the preposterous and the flat-out insane. Top of the list is Bael, a giant trash talking toad who lures prey by dangling his antennae, which as you may already have guessed are a couple of love-making lesbians. Each boss makes several appearances, which like the levels before them differ greatly once Dante is unleashed, and on higher difficulties pose (at least at first) a genuine challenge

TUROK

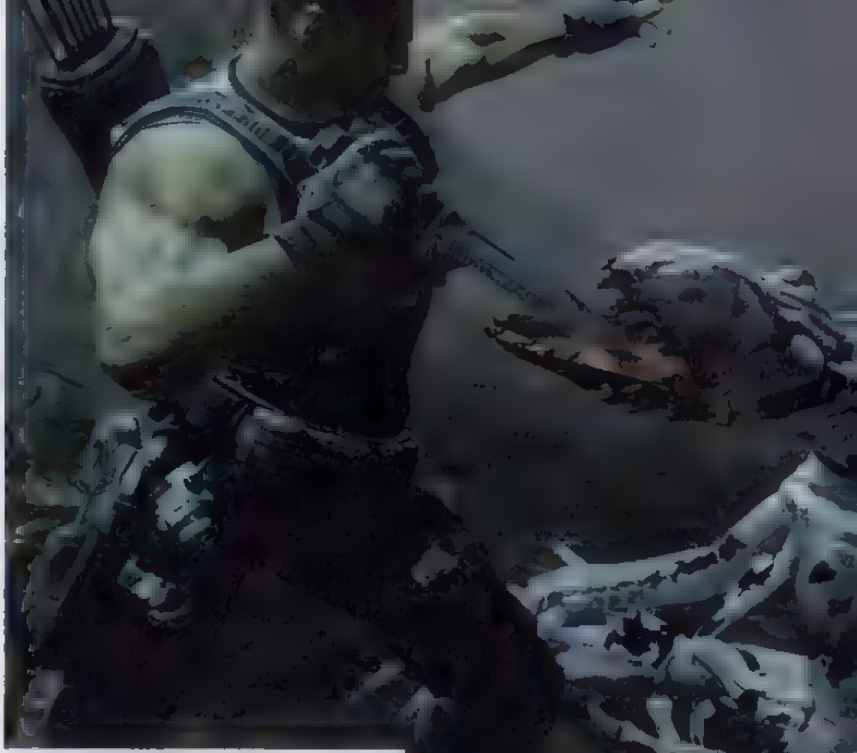
FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW (360, PS3), SPRING (PC)
PUBLISHER: TOUCHSTONE DEVELOPER: PROPAGANDA GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E182

Sometimes a dinosaur will take you unawares, initiating a limited QTE in which you try to extract your face from its gaping maw – the slower you follow the prompts, the more damage you take as you fight it off

Guns and dinosaurs: an infallible combination if there ever was one, right? Except various games have failed to make the formula work in the past, not least the last instalment in the *Turok* series, with this magazine concluding that its merits were evenly matched by its potential to be 'unforgiving, glitchy and irritating' (E115). Sadly, it is an accusation that could be similarly levelled at this latest *Turok* – a promising reinvention of the maligned dino-hunting franchise which ultimately makes many of the same mistakes.

This time around, Turok is an ex-con turned military man with a vendetta coerced into joining a rag-tag company of marines on a mission to extract and imprison a rogue agent wreaking havoc on a newly terraformed planet. Things do not go to plan, and soon Turok's allies in Whiskey Company find themselves dispersed across the hostile world, persecuted by the forces of the man they came to capture and harried by the planet's own primordial ecosystem. The game is at its best in its stealth sections where you pick off witless foes at range while creeping through the long grass, using the flare launcher to entice dinosaurs into attacking your human opponents. Unfortunately, this plays a lesser part in the overall game, outweighed by slightly turgid gunplay. Turok himself moves with frustrating sloth and the aiming controls have an unnaturally abrupt acceleration to them that sends your reticule skittering over your mark.

The mad-cap arsenal of *Turok*s past is replaced with a more mundane armoury; your bow, with its ability to pin enemies to walls, is the most entertaining and effective ranged weapon at your disposal, and the cinematic knife kills offer a visceral thrill the first few times you see them. Many of the smaller dinosaurs are thus dispatched with a context-sensitive tap of the trigger – in fact the knife is really the only effective means of getting through a pack of velociraptors, resulting in protracted battles which amount to a string of bloody, but often near-identical, animations. The difficulty is really only in reorienting yourself once the animation has finished, since the cinematics leave you in a different position from when you initiated the kill. The mushy jungle level design does little to help you find your direction again and things get worse when it's dark. And then things get worse still when it's dark and enemies are firing explosive rounds which repeatedly knock you off your feet and leave you facing a completely different direction with your vision blurred. Such visual effects can been used well to denote damage, but here the tedious cool-down frustrates rather than adrenalises.

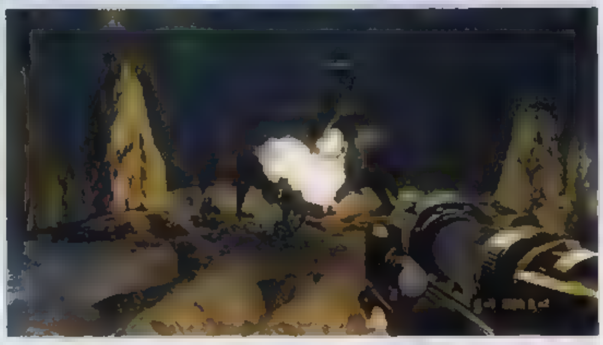


Velociraptors come in several flavours, and the harder ones can even spit green gloop at you. However, none requires particularly varied tactics to overcome and the cinematics for dispatching them are limited, although delightfully grisly

Perhaps realism is not the thing to be aiming for in a game whose central pleasure is the ability to kick dinosaurs in the face

It may be that such disorientation is realistic but, equally, perhaps realism is not the thing to be aiming for in a game whose central pleasure is the ability to kick dinosaurs in the face. It is of particular concern when death entails a punitive ten-minute trek from the last checkpoint. In fact, one of the very last and trickiest missions can see you lose 20 minutes of play, and doesn't even have the decency to put its checkpoint after the level's introductory cutscene. Lengthy loading times are another reason to begrudge the game's difficulty level which, even on the lowest setting, contains spikes

It's an inevitable side effect of being part of the shooter genre that few people are ever pleased to see you. In *Turok*, even your colleagues think you're a backstabber thanks to your past involvement with Kane



Some of the bigger dinosaurs don't submit to knives, so you have to gun them down – a task for which this gun is rather useful, firing a dart which can then be remotely detonated

that will have you staring at the loading screen for a sizeable chunk of playtime.

Yet, somehow, *Turok* manages to be a more compelling experience than its many and obvious failings would suggest. A lot of this can be attributed to elements peripheral to the actual action of the game – things such as the excellent animation. It is fundamentally this that makes the dinosaurs convincing and fearsome enemies. Attention has been lavished on these creatures: knife one and it writhes for a few moments, clawing at the ground in a febrile attempt to get purchase. Human enemies will similarly use their last breath to crawl away from you before expiring – animations that appear to be partly procedural, so that the limbs interact with the environment in a way that suggests real contact.

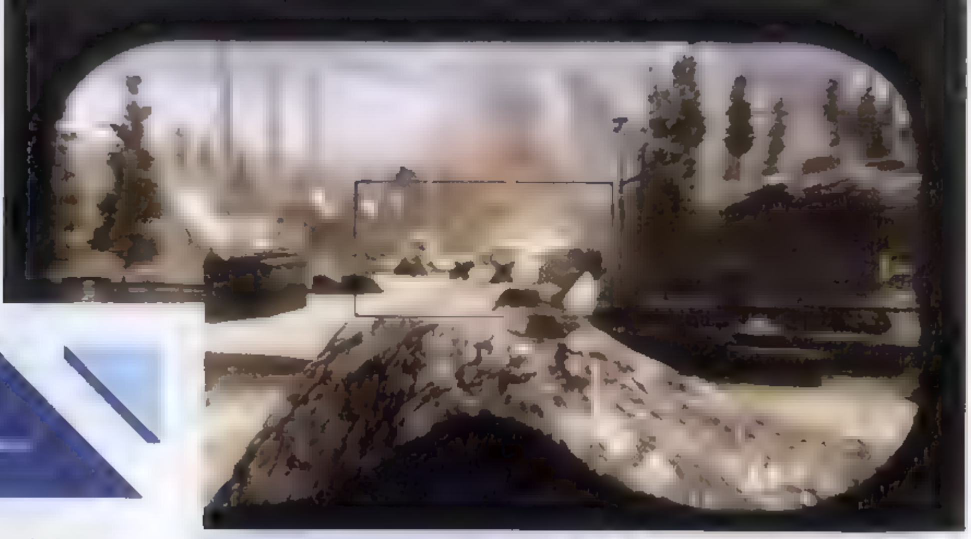
Equal care has been given to facial animations and the depiction of the characters as a whole, made particularly evident in the cutscenes. Turok himself glowers with doleful petulance, and the exaggerated underbite and heavy brow of your grudging companion, Slade, create one of the more expressive faces in videogames. In fact, although the hard-bitten space marines invite obvious comparisons with *Gears Of War*, Turok's allies have significantly more personality than those charmless hulks. Much of this is a product of the voice acting and, in particular, the presence of Ron Perlman in the cast. There's not a huge amount of dialogue to work with, and yet Perlman turns the surly, world-weary Slade into a sympathetic and humorous figure – a character whose initial animosity towards the player could otherwise have been grating. Powers Boothe also puts in a performance as the armoured antagonist, Kane, which elevates him above the stereotypical bogeyman. Although clearly restricted by genre and setting, the script is not without merit, and perhaps surprisingly you find yourself quite invested in the story, largely a result of the intermittent flashbacks which slowly reveal Turok's prior relationship with Kane.

This interest does not really communicate itself to the game's action. For the most part it's hard to care about the fate of the marines or the planet, and the characterisation of Kane's Wolf Pack as elite assassins is at odds with the bumbling idiots you dispatch for the greater part of the game. The sad fact is that this combat mostly fails to ignite interest, and combined with its cruel difficulty spikes, occasional glitches and a severe difference in graphical quality between 360 and PS3 versions (the latter losing out), Turok's strong [illegible] context and attention [illegible] a smattering of brave ideas [illegible]. **[5]**

Say no to robo-spiders

Boss battles are sticking points in so many games nowadays, and *Turok* throws up several dubious examples. As is apparently obligatory in all mediocre-to-substandard shooters of the last year, one boss is a giant robo-spider. It fires shells that send you flying, preventing you from getting up before the next one hits. A later battle against a massive fish monster induces a feeling approaching despair – hitting jump to evade its tendrils or projectiles simply doesn't always work, and it can wipe you out with two hits. More playtesting, please

Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park has much to answer for: velociraptors were the size of turkeys and had feathers. *Turok* makes the same anatomical errors, but at least you can boot these errors in the face



FRONTLINES: FUEL OF WAR

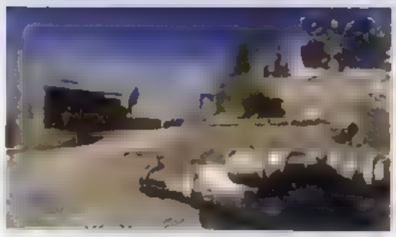
[illegible] 360 (VERSION TESTED) [illegible]
[illegible] KAOS STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E184, E185

Working class

Before deployment you can choose from a number of different preset weapon loadouts – but these do not enforce a drastic polarisation of roles. Even the sniper rifle is accompanied by a meaty shotgun as your secondary weapon, allowing the role greater versatility. However, Kaos's genius stroke is in creating classes that are independent from your choice of weaponry, each offering a specialisation that ranks up as play continues, giving the player access to tools and support – a succession of deadlier drones, EMP devices, gunships and air-strikes – the interaction of which remains elegant even as its complexity shoots upward.

Kaos Studios thinks it knows the *Battlefield* formula pretty well. It is, after all, comprised of the team behind its most successful mod, *Battlefield 1942*'s Desert Combat. Now, after a brief time working on *Battlefield 2* under the mantle of DICE's now-defunct American arm the studio is attempting to put to rout the franchise that first inspired it. For the most part, *Frontlines* stands up well alongside the game it imitates, and many of Kaos Studios refinements are a success – particularly in multiplayer, with its separation of weapon loadout from class-specific abilities (see 'Working class'). Being set in the near future *Frontlines*' arsenal is cluttered with colourful projections of military technology – remote-controlled drones, mounted railguns and other murderous joys are realised with a glee that is a little at odds with the game's otherwise rueful tone.

The most prominent innovation, however the eponymous frontline, is something of an uncertain contribution. By making the only active objectives those on the frontline itself, Kaos has created a more linear tug-of-war than was the case in *Battlefield*, the dispersed layout of which could lead to disorienting, fragmentary encounters. As these objectives are achieved, the frontline moves further into enemy territory, exposing new objectives and increasing the number of allied spawn points. Certainly, the linearity enforces greater player co-operation and erodes the intimidating learning curve, but this accessibility comes with a caveat: for those used to playing *Battlefield* as an organised team, it might seem like the frontline should emerge naturally from strategic necessity and doesn't need to be rigidly enforced. In fact, circumventing the frontline is a valid tactic – one that is not really meaningful here.



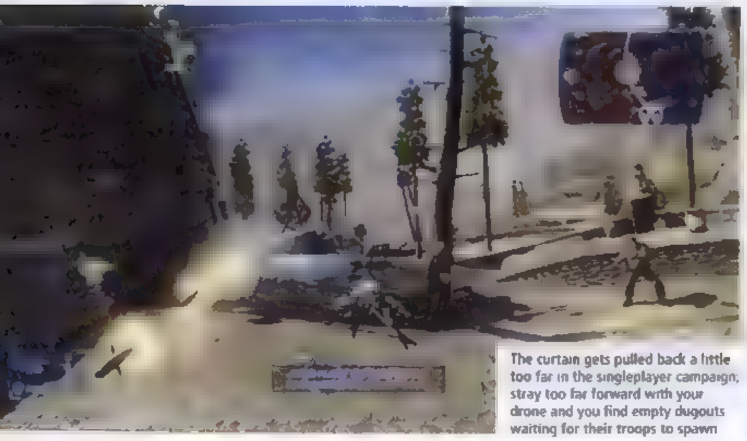
Kaos made the decision to prevent you from picking up enemy weapons. This ensures players stick to the balanced loadouts, but can be frustrating when you run out of ammo

Frontlines certainly packs in the boys' toys – a steady stream of helicopter drones, exploding remote tank busters, railgun emplacements and precision air-strikes (above) hold your attention in the singleplayer campaign

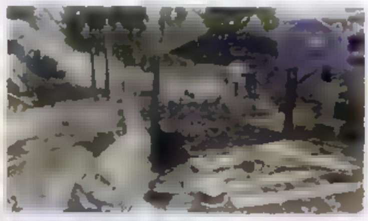
Sometimes missions leave you without AI companions – it turns out that these instances play little differently from when you have allies, who are little more than battlefield dressing; you alone are capable of completing objectives

Neither does the frontline mechanism fit well into the singleplayer campaign – since enemy forces only spawn once the frontline has been moved back, the game doesn't always convey the sense of a persistent battle. Only in scripted circumstances does the enemy push back and retake objectives from you. The result is that the levels can sometimes feel artificial and depopulated, the game neither recreating a sprawling, unrelenting conflict, nor managing to suggest a greater world through the controlled cinema of more linear shooters.

Despite this, the singleplayer campaign manages to be lively enough – more than just a primer for the multiplayer. The lateral freedom you have in approaching objectives, along with the choice of loadouts and vehicles, mitigates some of the game's rough edges, of which there are many. The minor framerate and screen-tearing issues on Xbox 360 are forgivable, but more crucial to the game is the lacklustre AI and the fact that vehicles snag a little too easily on scenery – fire hydrants, for example, prove to be surprisingly resilient to the 70-odd tonnes of tank bearing down upon them. There's little questioning Kaos's competence when it comes to the theory of its multiplayer game – the interplay of class, weaponry and vehicles is as subtle and accessible as it has ever been – but the uneven overall package suggests that the developer will not yet supplant DICE's sovereignty. **[7]**



The curtain gets pulled back a little too far in the singleplayer campaign; stray too far forward with your drone and you find empty dugouts waiting for their troops to spawn



The enemies are drunken Russians, lawless Africans and coke-dealing South Americans brought to justice by the righteous fist of the US

CONFLICT: DENIED OPS

[illegible]
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: PIVOTAL GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E161, E165

Any game which sees enemies build barricades out of exploding barrels, gas canisters and petrol-filled jerry cans is probably not trying to recreate the tactics of the modern battlefield with any great fidelity. *Denied Ops* is much more a kick-ass-and-chew-bubblegum shooter than the games that established the *Conflict* series, and, for the most part, it is less interesting as a result.

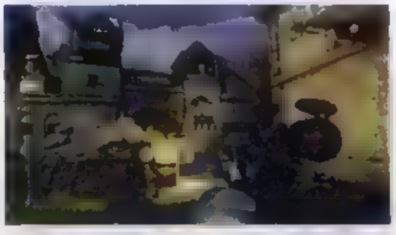
Although *Denied Ops* cuts down the traditional four-man squad to the unlikeable odd-couple of Lang and Graves, the game retains specialisation between characters and the ability to switch between them. Graves is fleet of foot and equipped with a sniper rifle, Lang is tougher and totes a massive but inaccurate cannon, and the later, better levels exploit their strengths in turn. Moving control between squadmates causes the camera to swoop between them, giving you an immediate sense of where you are in relation to the character you have just relinquished. Fundamentally, however, combat feels feeble and insubstantial – partly out of aesthetic failure to convey power, but mostly out of a design choice to limit the effectiveness of your weaponry (see 'Gun damn').

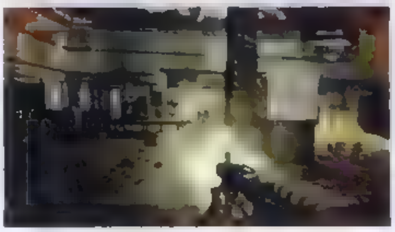
Fortunately, an upgrade system on completion of missions lends more flexibility to your armoury – a camera allows Graves to see around corners, and a 12-gauge attachment mitigates some of his weakness at close quarters. Lang gets a grenade launcher for those long shots. Even with this expanded armoury, however, the game's combat lacks variation and interest – and where it attempts to break up gunplay with a vehicle section you'd really rather it just hadn't bothered.

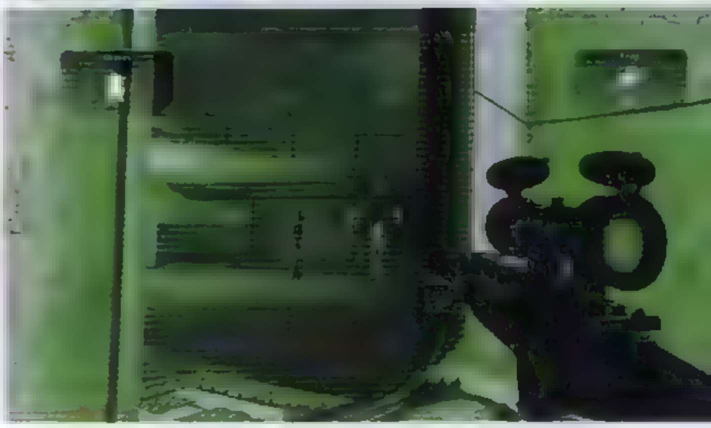
Many of the locations you'll have seen before, and more attractively rendered. However, while the early missions are onerous linear slogs, as the game progresses there are some which surprise you with a variety of approaches and optional side-quests. An assault on a tanker ship is one of the best, allowing for multiple routes and tactics. It's possible to complete the majority of the mission without raising an alarm, although you'll need to tell Lang to hang back – he has an irritating tendency to 'go loud' on a whim.

For the most part, though, your AI partner acts competently, only coming unstuck when dealing with heavy ordnance or a room full of exploding barrels – despite squad commands (which are all on a single button) that occasionally prove inexplicably unresponsive or serve to misunderstand the nature of your instruction.

Risible driving sections apart, *Denied Ops* is rarely a poor game – it is simply a glum experience that makes too little use of its two-man squad tactics, and doesn't do a great deal with its setting or characters to compel you onwards. **[5]**

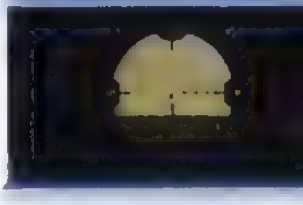






Your night-vision goggles are pretty essential for some missions – although the moving lines and visual effects used to make the mode look interesting, rather than just green, threaten to induce a migraine

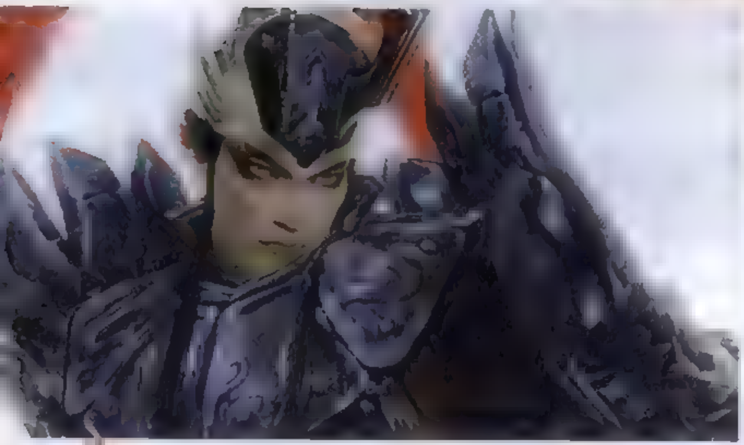
Gun damn



Despite the choice to give you unlimited ammo (save for explosives, which you must gather from supply crates), your arsenal always feels a little underpowered. Graves' sniper scope wants for another level of magnification, and wobbles around. This latter point would be fine, except that the game is a little pedantic with one-shot kills – bullets through the neck do little more than disorient your enemy. Oddly, your ammo count and selected weapon attachment aren't displayed out of combat – meaning you occasionally enter situations ill prepared.

Not only is Graves weak, but getting shot makes it difficult to get a bead on the enemy – understandably enough. The gun camera is the best way to take out enemies from comparative safety. The mission on the right sees you quietly infiltrate an arms deal. But, after your first stealth kill, your companion will decide to shoot the place down and set off the alarm

Challenge mode returns, offering timed gauntlets based on surviving without taking a hit, collecting items, covering ground or destroying objects. The body count challenge is still the most engaging, but can feel empty, missing out on the hordes of troops you'd expect to see



DYNASTY WARRIORS 6

0, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
PUBLISHER: KOEI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It's almost three years since *Dynasty Warriors 5* was released, but Koei's sleepless production line has made that seem far from the case. Most notable within its industrious schedule has been the glorious, IP-clash excess of *Warriors Orochi*, the garish territory-based scrapping of *Gundam Musou*, and the genuine departure of the strategic tussles present in *Bladestorm*. This is the current-gen return to the series that made Koei's name, as well as made it synonymous with deadening combo-driven crowd combat in the eyes of some.

Relatively, it's certainly the biggest stride the series has taken. New weapons, new costumes, new attack strings (see 'Renbu six'), but fewer playable characters than last time around (still, it's a hefty register of 41). To non-converts, catcalls regarding repetition won't be silenced. Neither (thankfully) will any aimed at the hammy voice acting, nor those centred on the character pop-in that sees a troop of enemies faded in to view just metres away.

But it's a lesser sin when things are this frantic, with a much nippier pace at work. The throngs don't just have higher head counts, but feel busier. Flag carriers lead battalions. Troops scale ladders when assaulting castles. Allied soldiers stop, cheer and punch the air when an enemy general is defeated or stronghold captured. There's far more energy on display, not least from your own character, who can tear through enemy ranks and send the KO count spiralling like never before. Strongholds can now be taken by slaying a certain number of bog-standard troops, while the doors of many forts can simply be battered open. Swimming is another slight but appreciated addition.

The HD format means the camera feels distanced from the main character, which can be an issue when the screen is at peak capacity, while the actions of boss generals are difficult to track. Then again, you've never seen special attacks produce such a downpour of bodies in the *Dynasty Warriors* series before. Visually, there's a step up in environment quality, and incidental in-game cutscenes are significantly slicker. Slowdown, however, will be common. The upside is that you'll often get every remaining general on the battlefield taking part in the climactic skirmish of a campaign.

Dynasty Warriors 6 is not a reinvention, far from it. This is revitalisation, a fresh surge of life for the long-serving warhorse. By any typical measure of gaming it's no grand advance, but for those whose fingers have long been drilled by the brawls of Koei's sprawling riots, it's as worthwhile and frenzied as it's ever been.

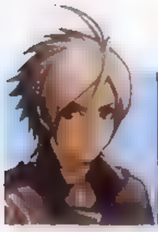
[7]

Renbu six

The 'Renbu' meter is the most significant addition to combat, a meter stashed at the bottom right of the screen which can open new attack strings and other flourishes. A combo-counter keeps track of hits landed without taking any damage, but is otherwise generous with the duration of inactivity needed to reset it. Successive hits charge the Renbu through four levels – two of which need to be unlocked in a character's skill tree – opening up more intense attacks and adding further heat to battles. Weapon augmentations can expand the timeframe within which it decays, while certain mounts prevent your Renbu meter from decreasing when travelling or attacking on horseback.

The appearance of reputed 'beast' Lu Bu on a battlefield is now a fearsome event. Even on the easiest setting, just a few swipes from his blade can end the game

A multi-branching skill tree for each character is a sleeker and more appealing way of handling the upgrade process, compared to collecting and equipping buffs and powers. Exp bonuses are available for achieving targets in stages, and are slightly tougher than the skill unlock criteria of last year's PS2 game *Warriors Orochi*



ADVANCE WARS: DAYS OF RUIN

[illegible] OUT NOW
PUBLISHER NINTENDO DEVELOPER INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

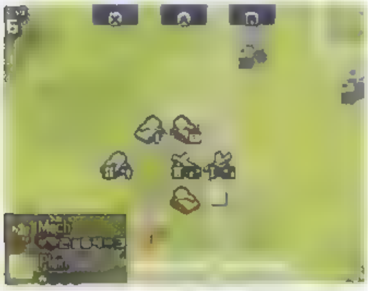
It's the aesthetic change that will strike first, a move towards a gritty realism that serves to reflect *Days Of Ruin*'s My Chemical Romance take on the apocalypse, a story in which a noble army attempts to survive in a world destroyed by a meteor strike. It hasn't cast aside the previous games' cartoony feel entirely – its cardboard caricatures might be less lovably colourful, but they're still outlined in black. And, most importantly, though battlefield units have been redrawn to take better advantage of the DS's screen resolution than *Dual Strike*'s did, they sport the same basic style and eager two-frame bounce.

And, indeed, once into a battle, it all feels absolutely faithful to the clockwork formula that works to make the series such magic to play. A few tiny tweaks to the way units are ordered to move and attack has slightly streamlined control, but it all works and feels just the same as it ever did. What quickly becomes evident is that most of the effort putting *Days Of Ruin* together has been invested not in the art style and theme, but in stripping down and overhauling a set of features that, in the case of *Dual Strike*, had become distinctly bloated. Combat mode (thankfully) and 'dual front' battles have been removed, and CO powers have been severely cut back. Leaner and fitter, it pushes basic tactics – unit strengths, terrain and movement – to the fore.

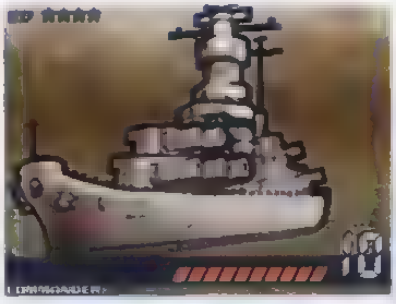
Days Of Ruin's new roster of units is therefore spruce and surprisingly innovative in lending each type more individual and engaging strengths. The tanks have been pruned back to three useful ones, and new additions and amendments include the Bike, an infantry unit with long movement range, the Battleship now fires after moving, giving it unprecedented range and adaptability, the Rig (what was the APC) can build resupply-only airports or ports, vital commodities given how fast ammo and fuel run out in *Days Of Ruin*, Carriers can now build the enormously cathartic Seaplane, a unit with low ammo and fuel but effective against any unit, and the indirect Anti-Tank can counter-attack and has no adjacent blindspot.

Dual Strike's main source of bloat was its CO powers, and here it's been efficiently lanced. CO powers are much more subtle, and require more skill. Now, COs must be loaded into specific units (at a price), and the power gauge increases only when it, or any other units within its radius of influence, give or receive damage. And to deepen strategy still further, units in the radius also receive CO-specific boosts to their effectiveness.

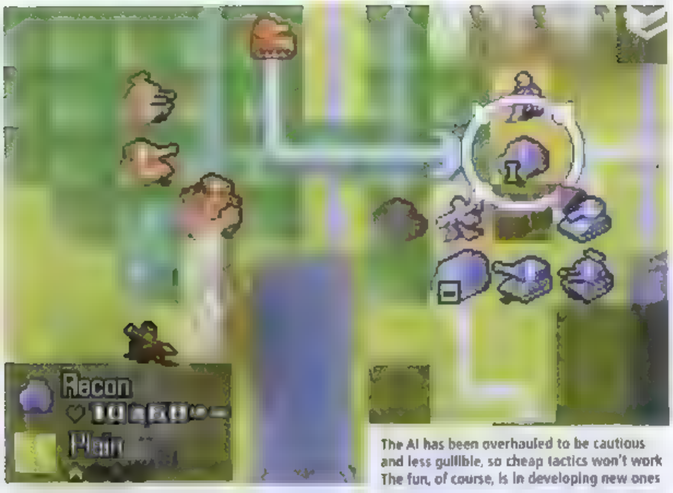
In *Days Of Ruin* it's evident that the secret to reiterating *Advance Wars*, a game whose original could barely be improved upon, is to strip it back to its first principles rather than building upon it. Here, each new feature and adaptation is thoroughly considered and balanced against the series' fundamental rock/paper/scissors design. As a result, this is the same game you've been playing for seven years – or perhaps even longer. And for that it's a thorough success. **[8]**



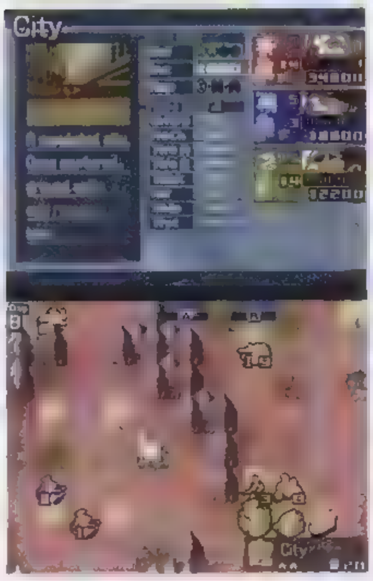
On destroying three enemies, your units are awarded veteran status and receive boosts to their attack and defence stats, making it all the more vital to keep them alive. The result is a more careful approach to battling



On scorched earth levels, the art style can be bleak, and a lack of bright colours can make it hard to tell if a city is neutral



The AI has been overhauled to be cautious and less gullible, so cheap tactics won't work. The fun, of course, is in developing new ones



COMMANDER
10

COMMANDER
COMMANDER

Online multiplayer works well, allowing two minutes per turn. Matchmaking is assigned a random map, but registered friends can select maps and voice chat

Cut scenes

It's fair to say that the campaign mode's story can be a little intrusive, with characters popping into conversations before, after and during each mission. As peppily as they're written, they're much too long – going into turgid emotional detail about characters' attitudes to war: they don't like it, an opinion that unfortunately contrasts with your eagerness to finally see a bit of action. They can be skipped, but what they also do is provide rationales for contrivances such as some units being non-controllable or getting all the enemy attention, and the fact you often have to play with AI allies. Fortunately, the mission design is so good that they avoid being mere novelties, instead providing variety and pace.

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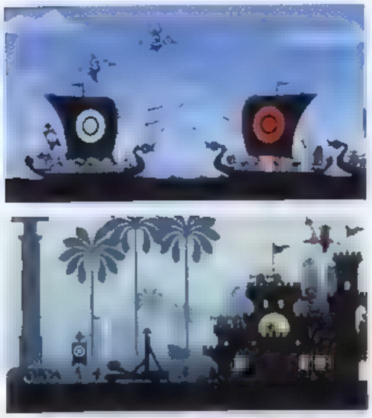
PATAPON

[illegible] NOW (JAPAN), FEBRUARY 28 (UK, US)
[illegible] INTERLINK
[illegible]

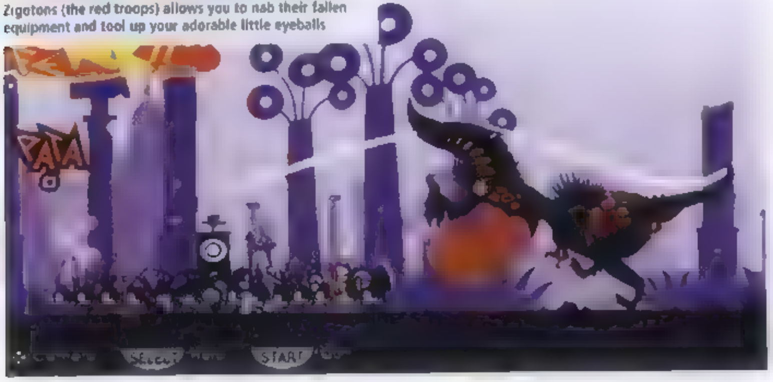
You want to love this game. It's bright, it's charming, it's quirky, and it sounds great. It's on the PSP, a system with a lack of tailor-made software, it's from the creators of *LocoRoco*, an appealing title that fell just short of greatness, and it lets you play the role of god. *Patapon* is a more varied experience than *LocoRoco*, with several flashes of brilliance, but, like the earlier title, it's also keen on repeating itself, and occasionally frustrating. Because of that, whether or not you enjoy the game depends on whether being god to the Patapons is beguiling to the point at which the odd clumsy moment comes to seem irrelevant.

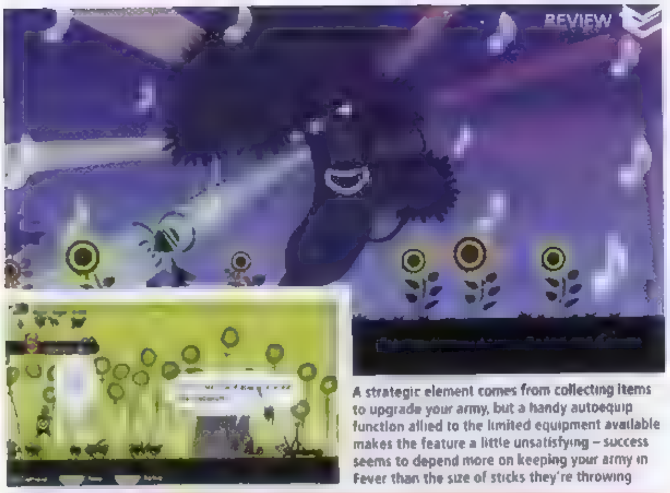
At root, the game revolves around the movement of your Patapons, over which you have indirect control through the PSP's four face buttons. Four different combinations of these commands can instruct your army to advance, attack, defend or retreat, while various 'miracles' can be acquired and triggered when in Fever mode (of which more later). You beat a rhythm, and the Patapons carry out the action while repeating it, and you begin another chant. Because there is a significant pause between pressing buttons and action, it falls to other parts of *Patapon* to provide the necessary feedback. It does this in two key ways: the screen is outlined briefly on each beat (both your own and the Patapons'), while the background music and Patapon chants repeat and intensify your beat.



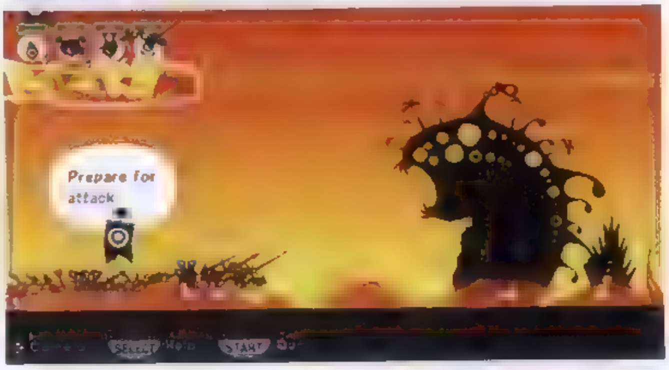
The frequent hunting of beasties powers up your troops, if occasionally proving a little repetitive. Fighting the Zigotons (the red troops) allows you to nab their fallen equipment and tool up your adorable little eyeballs

In general, this works extremely well, and the link between your own rhythm and the game's feedback is a strong and rewarding one. But there are some difficulties, primarily because the music is dynamic and will switch depending on the commands you issue to the army – the change between sections is sometimes not quite instantaneous, and the tiny but noticeable lull that occurs on these occasions can easily throw your rhythm. This is compounded by a counter-intuitive audio effect as Fever mode is triggered, which frequently results in a combo chain being lost just as it is achieved. On the later levels this almost always results in some serious problems and occasionally one wrong beat can fail an entire mission. Difficulty in itself isn't a problem, but on the later levels *Patapon* can become frustratingly repetitive. These aural lapses are a pity, because the game's audio is brilliant on occasion, and can be as immersive as it is frustrating.





A strategic element comes from collecting items to upgrade your army, but a handy autoequip function allied to the limited equipment available makes the feature a little unsatisfying – success seems to depend more on keeping your army in Fever than the size of sticks they're throwing



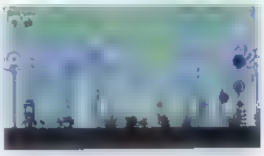
But the brilliant core idea behind *Patapon* is extended well into some varied missions, and the devotion of your small charges is quite touching. There are innovative ideas sprinkled throughout – one mission designed to be failed on the first attempt, for example, as well as different enemy fortifications that demand tactics and particular items to destroy. But the game repeats some relatively mundane tasks, like killing the same boss monsters – except the third and fourth time they have more health and inflict more damage with the same attacks and patterns. And how on Earth escort missions found their way into this title is a mystery.

Against these niggles is the game's effortless charisma and its central mechanic, which despite the problems is used as effectively as you feel it could be. *Patapon* is highly original and, more importantly, enduringly enjoyable, even with its problems. The level of personality in the Patapons and their world makes up for any disappointments – and your involvement in the story becomes huge. You want to love *Patapon*; it certainly deserves affection. And if you never take a chance, warts and all, how would you ever know?

[8]

I say, hold up there, what!

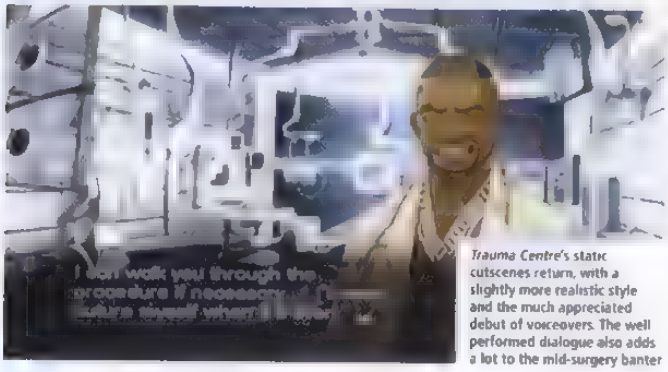
The translation from Japanese as a whole seems to have been rendered into British, rather than American, English – and all the talk of spanking the bottoms of your dastardly foes is certainly an interesting change from the usual round of asses and hos. This brings its own pitfalls, of course, and some sections recall nothing as much as, lo, the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch. The overall effect is so charming that these lapses are entirely forgivable – and more games should tell you to 'run like the dickens' to escape a big monster.



You'll begin the game with only the flag-bearer, but by the later stages there's a little army running around to your beats

TRAUMA CENTRE: NEW BLOOD

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Trauma Centre's static cutscenes return, with a slightly more realistic style and the much appreciated debut of voiceovers. The well performed dialogue also adds a lot to the mid-surgery banter

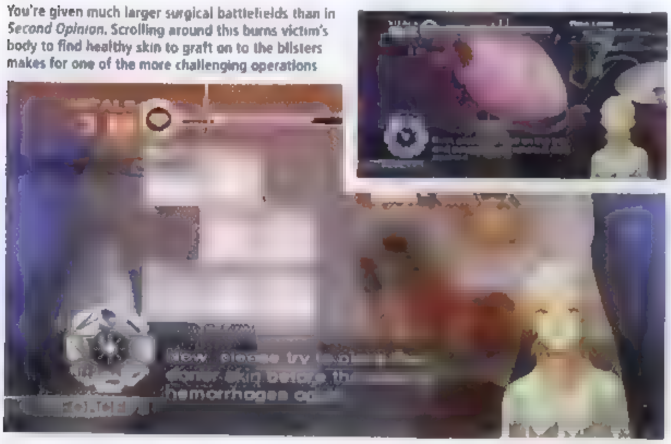
Not simply referring to the two new medical upstart protagonists, it seems that Atlus chose the *New Blood* subtitle to trumpet the arrival of an entirely fresh instalment instead of a reworked DS title, as was the case with *Second Opinion*. And while there is too much familiarity with the cast of tumours, aneurysms and glass extraction to suggest a full regime change, a maturing of the formula is undeniable.

Where the bonus missions of *Second Opinion* added only fleeting glimpses at exciting new Wii-exclusive procedures, *New Blood* revisits these moments and adds more still. The much-lauded bone fragment jigsaw puzzle now appears on a regular basis and is joined by a terrific, if icky, skin graft procedure and a series of organ transplants that act as the narrative key to the new bio-nasty, STIGMA.

Aside from this fresh biological threat, the main development comes in the form of twoplayer co-op. There are few activities so well suited to, indeed, intended for, multiple hands than surgery – and the game really opens up when played as such. Not only does feverishly divvying up the body into two viscera-encrusted chore lists make for some terrifically comic arguments, but it adds weight to the included online leaderboards as pairs chase the perfect harmony required for the best scores.

The strength of the co-op does, however, take its toll on singleplayer. There is no difficulty scaling between the two modes, and so missions that have clearly been designed to push two players will leave the lone surgeon broken. No task is impossible alone but the ease of co-op mustn't cloud the fact that Atlus is still to find that sweet spot between virtual and actual brain surgery. **[7]**

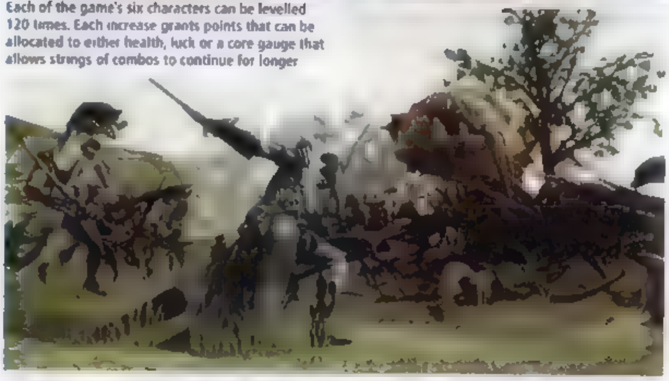
You're given much larger surgical battlefields than in *Second Opinion*. Scrolling around this burns victim's body to find healthy skin to graft on to the blisters makes for one of the more challenging operations



KINGDOM UNDER FIRE: CIRCLE OF DOOM

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: BLUESIDE

Each of the game's six characters can be levelled 120 times. Each increase grants points that can be allocated to either health, luck or a core gauge that allows strings of combos to continue for longer



The synthesis system is deep and initially confusing. Almost any two items in the game can be spliced together but working out combinations that create positive, rather than negative, effects takes effort

With hazy, pretty environments, interesting enemies miles beyond the design creativity of most hack-and-slash titles, and a fluidity of control that makes your character dart and twirl with pleasing and deadly precision, first impressions of this *Kingdom Under Fire* spin-off are positive.

But it soon emerges that these long, twisting pathways, just a few short metres wide and endlessly punctuated by intermittent *World Of WarCraft* raid-style huddles of grunts, are as linear as time itself. You run a ceaseless cross-country gauntlet, fighting and collecting dropped items before synthesising weapons and armour to create more powerful iterations at the infrequent stop points along the way. The occasional boss fight adds some variety but there are no towns, no inns, no information to collect, no girl to rescue, no real objectives save the tireless pursuit of power.

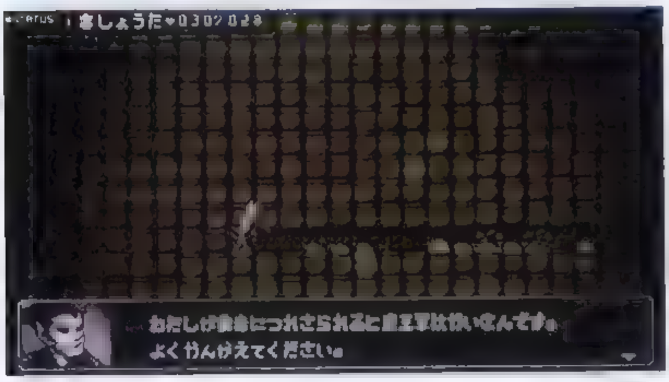
In most cases, the thrill of cutting through swathes of orcs and goblins with a meticulously levelled katana is reason enough for the fight. But here the lack of obvious motives for the six playable characters irks amid the shallow repetitiveness of battle, which enjoys neither the scale nor strategy elements of Koei's titles. What little plot impetus exists is expressed solely in dreamworld encounters, fleeting fragments of conversation held with NPCs during the brief moments of respite along the game's otherwise endless paths of violence.

The missions born of these conversations are solely concerned with augmenting your character's abilities: want to earn a new special move? Simply activate the mission and harvest the required numbers of specific enemies. Most videogames – particularly eastern ones – have the quest to increase the power and ability of their lead character for a backbone, but never has it been so isolated and obvious as it is here.

Developer Blueside is clearly banking on players' desire to showboat being a mitigating factor. Co-operative play (online only) blends seamlessly with the main experience, allowing three additional players to drop into a game at any time. The opportunity to show off huge strings of linked moves wrung from hours of grinding will appeal to a certain niche, but for most players there's just not enough here to hold any prolonged interest. **[4]**

YUUSHA NO KUSE NI NAMAIKIDA

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK, US)
PUBLISHER: SCEJ DEVELOPER: ACQUIRE



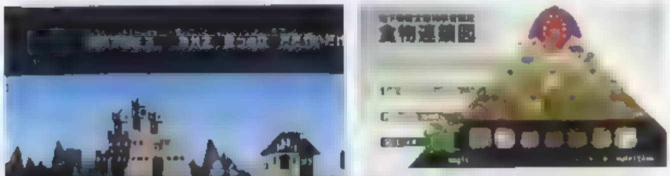
The linear structure gives way to a twisting maze of blind alleys and heavily populated corridors within the first two levels. Leading the heroes into high-level monster hordes is key and soon becomes intuitive

Dungeon Keeper, reimagined as a worm farm and visualised by a Japanese pixel-artist: Acquire's demon-lair creation game joins the PSP's set of idiosyncratic genre-busters that includes *LocoRoco* and *Patapon*.

Placing you firmly on the side of the bad guys, gameplay is split into two phases. During the first, you excavate an underground world in which to strategically place the demonic main character; during the second, AI-controlled heroes descend into your maze, attempting to hunt him down and drag him back to the surface. Every level of the game takes place within a side-viewed cut-away of ground, 36 squares deep by 60 wide, below an 8bit fantasy landscape. The only limitations on the form that your lair takes are that construction has to start at the top entrance and that all squares dug up must link to it, meaning no dead-end passages.

Digging certain blocks reveals creatures that will then patrol the tunnels, their types defined by the kind of soil from which they were born. By feeding on or pollinating adjacent blocks, creatures may also affect the type of monster that might emerge when they're excavated. It's a mechanism that turns what could have been a relatively simple block puzzler into a complex game of ecosystem management. There's a removal of direct control here – creatures' simple behaviour is only influenced by your shaping of their environment, the game's deep and varied strategic complexity springing from your attempts to manage their actions.

While it initially appears to be an unexpectedly brief experience, the game's main mode actually proves well-paced as a portable title, as a highly experimental take on the block puzzler, and as a score-attack challenge. An intelligent and extensive set of training tests eases you into its atypical intricacies, with each attempt being given a score and grade. Ultimately, though, it's the charm of presentation and the tightness with which the disparate gameplay elements are tied into a coherent system that keeps you digging. **[7]**



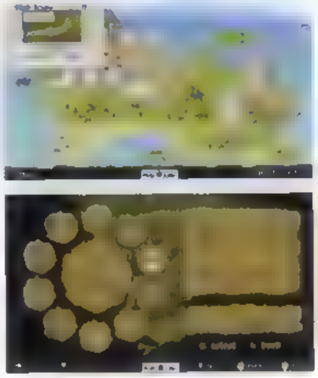
The ecosystem's hierarchy of creatures and tiles appears surprisingly limited when you first begin play, but quickly reveals itself to be complex

PIXELJUNK MONSTERS

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: Q-GAMES

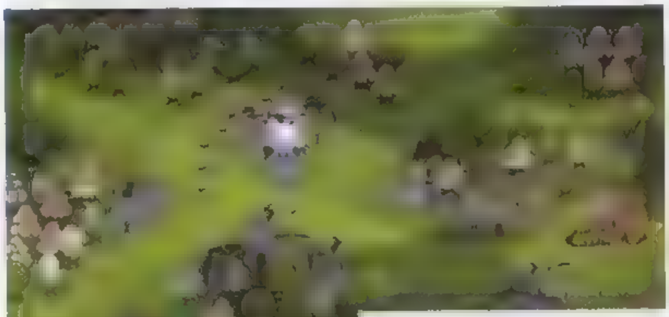
It's impossible not to make a comparison within moments of exploring *PixelJunk Monsters*' tutorial. This is PSN's answer to the tower defence genre most recently popularised by *Desktop Tower Defense* – in a nutshell, indeed. Waves of enemies, their appearance prompted by a scrolling bar at the bottom left of the screen, feed into view and snake their way towards a gaggle of villagers that need your protection. You do this by enlisting trees and transforming them into attack towers for a certain cost: any tree in a stage is a potential cannon, and such an open-season approach to resource management strategies feels liberating and spontaneous, even if it's not as flexible as other tower titles.

There's a price, of course, and the coins dropped by enemies allow great stockades to be constructed as each of the levels progress. The variety of enemy types will often require you to knock things down and build them up afresh, and even then there can be an unpredictability to keep you on your toes – occasionally, enemy waves are denser than expected, which can cause havoc. However dainty it may appear to be, this is a game that *demands* strategy rather than just allowing it. To see an enemy gang arrive in the later acts of a stage and lay waste to your precious villagers due to just one misplacement or poor previous choice can be devastating. But then you dig in once more, plans rejigged and knuckles cracked, and as *Monsters*' hooks dig in its fair balancing becomes apparent.



Monsters is best enjoyed in co-op. With two players, strategies can be metered out on the fly with more success and satisfaction than solo

It's the gem pick-ups that detract. These are collected from defeated enemies and used to upgrade existing towers or 'research' newer, more potent ones. It's the latter application that feels needless: the extra coin-cost of these stronger towers feels like enough economising to facilitate tactics. This recedes in later levels, as gems begin to appear more often. The movement speed of your avatar can feel gummy, too. It's part of the game's balance, but even an unlockable speed upgrade won't mollify those who crave a mouse pointer. Then again, *Monsters* is unhurried compared to *Desktop Tower Defense* – even down to the much less speedy rate of turret fire – but is no less tense for it. Having moved up an entire notch from inaugural title *Racers*, the *PixelJunk* brand is becoming one of PSN's most promising and confident niches. **[7]**



While you have to abide by the slow movement speed, such characterisation brings a bonus: dancing. In any spare time, you can stand next to a tower and throw shapes to help it level up

BEAUTIFUL KATAMARI

[illegible]

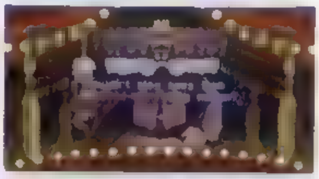
There's nothing quite like the sweet-toothed joy to be had from a *Katamari* game, but there's also nothing quite like not feeling that joy. Four games in, and Namco's inimitable gather 'em up has lost momentum while gaining recognition. While it's glorious to see its toyshop world appear in HD, other aspects feel robbed of their fidelity. What's been gained in clarity and intensity has been lost in playfulness and delightful surprise.

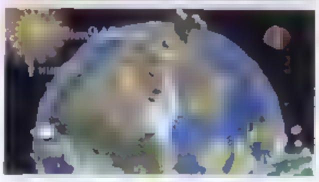
Stages are now incredibly rich in objects, a population with the rarest of bald patches. To counter this generosity, strategy is introduced via themes; stages prioritise the collection of a certain class of items. Venus, for example, asks you to make valuable or expensive clutter your main concern, with your post-game level heavily linked to such monomania. Putting the emphasis here detracts from the core satisfaction of the game – that of gleefully steamrolling everything in your path. Such a goal has played a bit-part in previous titles, sure, but it's never been this vague in execution, and its prominence can be cloying.

Katamari Damacy has long represented one of the most beautiful renditions of an age-old videogame cliché – putting the universe to rights – and has been as much a pleasure to review as to simply play. *We Love Katamari* was a successful sequel, despite its diminished sense of impact. It spun the original's framework in a number of captivating ways, enough to make it count. Not least was its story, which was knowing, smart and endearing, unlike *Beautiful Katamari*'s rather laboured setup.

It's pleasing to see such a loveable creation stretch its legs, less so when it seems to be stretching itself too thin because when *Beautiful Katamari* covers new ground, it's with the kind of success that makes you pine for the whole thing to have had a more experimental attitude. Its online aspect isn't elaborate, but is indeed beautiful. Aside from offline co-op and versus modes, online fourplayer battles are supported through a great lobby, a day-glo meadow where impromptu games of football are possible. Less flattering, however, is the Marketplace presence. Offering new stages for a paid download feels needless and exploitative given how brief the game itself is, even though their cost isn't great.

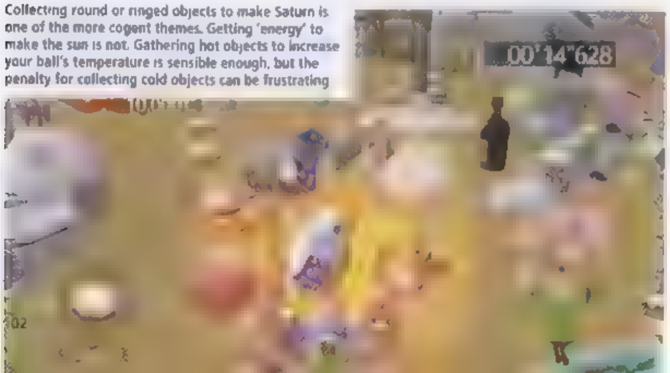
Still, in the context of Xbox 360's catalogue it remains an enlivening and idiosyncratic experience, and attempts to share its roll-playing wonder with a rejig rather than a conversion. But that's how it feels: brand extension, dilution rather than enrichment. There's nothing quite like the despondency of handing a *Katamari* title a score like this. **[6]**





The game's trump card is scale, allowing you to take on the very surface of the Earth. The subsequent space-staged sequence is stunning

Collecting round or ringed objects to make Saturn is one of the more cogent themes. Getting 'energy' to make the sun is not. Gathering hot objects to increase your ball's temperature is sensible enough, but the penalty for collecting cold objects can be frustrating



OMEGA FIVE

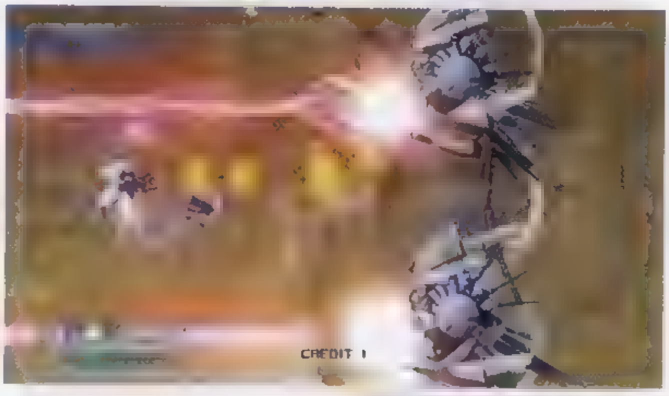
[illegible]

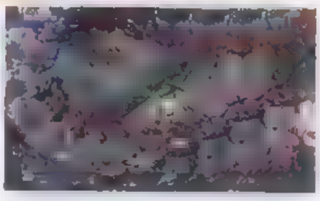
As the developer of the delightfully pastoral *Harvest Moon*, it might seem strange that Natsume has suddenly leapt into the world of side-scrolling shooters with the XBLA-only *Omega Five*. But actually it's a reprisal of the company's early history, which includes the likes of the unfortunately named *SCAT Special Cybernetic Attack Team*, which, indeed, *Omega Five* appears to have been inspired by for its flying player character.

Apart from its *Geometry Wars*-style motion-independent aiming, *Omega Five*'s main attraction is the variety in its eventual roster of four characters, two of which are unlocked on completion of its four levels. The initial pair – Ruby, a gun-toting lingerie model, and Tempest, a buff, fluid-ejaculating alien – are equipped with their own set of three upgradeable weapons and special attack. Ruby's guns are fairly standard shooter fare, but she has a satellite that blocks enemy bullets and can be thrown out to attach to enemies and damage them. Tempest shoots out liquid fire, acid and metal, with varying arcs and secondary fire effects, and can slow enemy bullets before sending them back to their makers. A little risk-reward dynamic is lent by collecting the showers of pink chips left by destroyed enemies for smart bombs (which revolve around the character to provide cover from bullets, another nod to *SCAT*), and there's a dodge move that will skip the character a short distance in exchange for health.

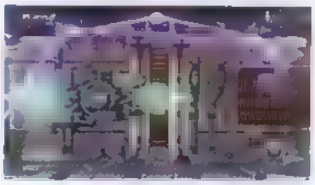
With its complex controls and tactical options, *Omega Five* hardly presents an exacting shooter experience. Player characters are detailed while the enemies are often large, and their hit boxes are indistinct. And when the action ramps up, so too does the onscreen confusion of pink chips, bullets, enemies, terrain, obstacles and your own fire. Moreover, each level also includes a screen-filling mini-boss which, though it's often foreshadowed by it moving in the background first, will burst into view and often unfairly hit your character.

What *Omega Five* lacks in purity it gains in bombast. Though it won't enthral for long, it doesn't demand the meticulous level-learning required of many of its kind, and as such presents an entertaining challenge. **[6]**





Once you've progressed beyond the surprisingly bland, snowy first level, the environments become vividly intricate and feature some enormous foes, such as this undulating worm



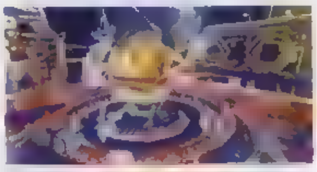
Characters carry only one of their three weapons at a time – changing requires a pickup. Collecting subsequent identical pickups will upgrade them

SONIC RIVALS 2

[illegible] BACKBONE ENTERTA[illegible]

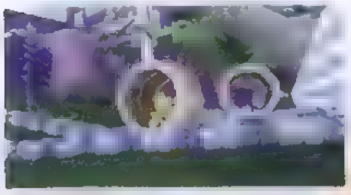
With the very occasional exception, the scattershot approach Sega has taken to its iconic franchise has yielded only a string of incoherent titles, whose attempts to renovate only fragmented and diluted *Sonic*'s original appeal. *Sonic Rivals 2* is not the title to buck this trend – and this is all the more frustrating given that its beautiful 2.5D tracks periodically nail the fundamental challenges of *Sonic* while massaging them into a form that better suits the racing format of the *Rivals* sub-series.

For the most part, *Rivals 2* avoids the sudden, unforeseeable death-drops that have blighted other recent *Sonic* titles; if you tumble here you can continue on a lower route. Though there is the rare pit in the later levels (merely resetting your position on the track), the courses themselves are by and large forgiving – even if your opponents aren't. Beating the near-infallible AI to the line is a challenge best described as punitive, and periodically maddeningly unbalanced. Player characters will clip skittishly to the wrong surface at vital moments and context-sensitive actions are a little unresponsive – but these minor mechanical issues are the least of the ways in which the odds are stacked against the player. Special abilities and power-ups can instantly obliterate the lead for which you have been struggling – and there is only occasional evidence that they work as effectively against the AI. Defeat often feels unreasonable, and your infrequent victory unexpected and arbitrary. And this difficulty is not evenly maintained; several later levels are peculiarly simple, and one of the major boss battles appears to be impossible to fail.



The characters' special abilities are unequal. Silver the Hedgehog's mind control amounts to an automatic win, whereas Tails' superpower seems to be to fly slowly into any obstructions

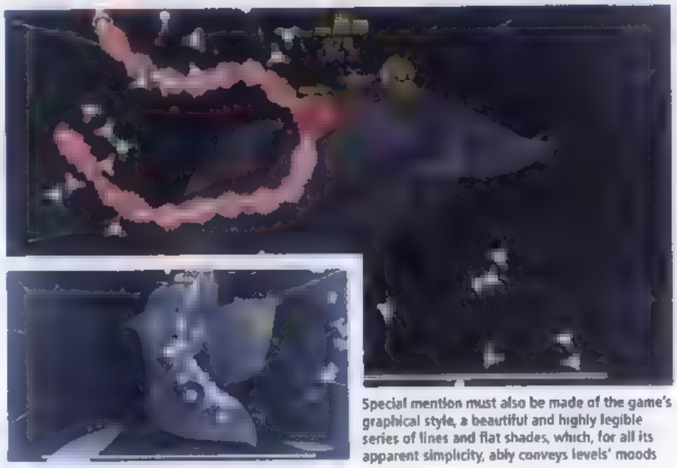
Contributing to the disappointment are asinine boss encounters and a series of one-on-one battles which amount to pressing X in the vicinity of an opponent before he does. The presence of extensive two-disc multiplayer goes some way to compensate for the lack of a cogent overall vision, offering both the events of the singleplayer game and a variety of lively battle modes. Nonetheless, in mishandling its competitive element *Rivals 2* sabotages its potential to recapture past glory, and its disjointed, erratic design makes its momentary successes seem almost accidental. **[5]**



Annoyingly, the gauge which measures your completion of the courses does not take into account their many long, vertical sections, but only your horizontal distance from the finish

RIFF: EVERYDAY SHOOTER

FORMAT PS3 RELEA[illegible] OUT NOW
PUBLISHER SCE [illegible] QUEASY GAMES
[illegible]



Special mention must also be made of the game's graphical style, a beautiful and highly legible series of lines and flat shades, which, for all its apparent simplicity, ably conveys levels' moods

It might sound pretentious, but Jonathan Mak's description of his game as an 'album of shooter games' is a rather beautiful one. It's not a trite reference to its use of music as the backbone to its twin-stick shooter gameplay, because you quickly realise that the game works just like a music album. It can be played through as a sequence of eight songs, or they can be played individually, and just as music is built from variations on themes, *Everyday Shooter*'s levels are variations on shooter principles from such titles as *Geometry Wars*, *Every Extend* and *Warning Forever*, as well as Mak's own *Gate 88*, but the game brings plenty of its own ideas, too.

The music is extremely important, of course, each level being backed by an instrumental guitar song played by Mak, which informs its pace and mood. Like Mizuguchi's *Rez* and *Lumines* (don't worry, the game gratefully acknowledges all influences), riffs and twangs harmonised with the song signal destroy enemies and score pick-ups. The music frequently mirrors the action, too – a different attack phase operates during the chorus of the third level, called Lush Look Killer (their names are like songs, too). The levels demonstrate the same emotional range that the songs do: the wistfully tinged melodics of the first level, Robot, the fast-paced pyrotechnics of Build 88, and the harrowing apocalypse of Bits of Fury.

Points aren't only for scores, they can be spent on unlocking levels, extra lives and graphic effects. Some levels give more points than others

Each level also contains an intricately designed central mechanic that must be exploited, as if teasing the meaning from a song, to achieve the combos that release the bounties of dots that must be collected for points. Some hinge on shooting certain enemies that trigger *Every Extend*-style chains of explosions, like Robot. Others depend on carefully targeting certain nodes to destroy networks of immobile hazards, or taking out turrets and tanks in the RTS-like Build 88. Bits of Fury, meanwhile, mixes a faster-paced version of Robot with a boss battle in its second half.

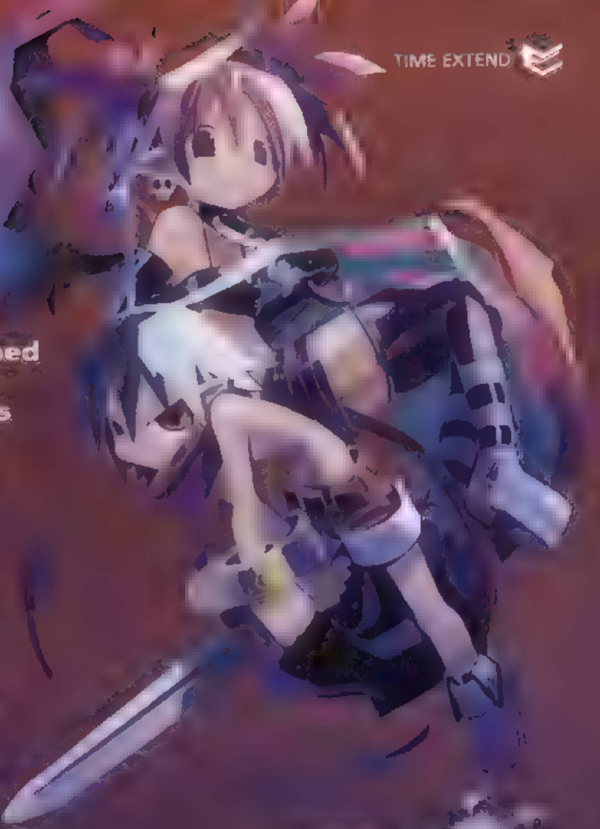
The result, for all its lyric-less and narrative-free abstraction, and within the close bounds of its essential design, is a personal and affecting play experience. Outside of that, it's also a celebratory and successful accumulation of many ideas about videogame design, music and independent auteur-driven development. And that's not something released every day. **[8]**

PlayStation 2

TIME EXTEND

DISGAEA: HOUR OF DARKNESS

FORMAT: PS2
PUBLISHER: KOEI
DEVELOPER: NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE
ORIGIN: JAPAN
RELEASE: [redacted]

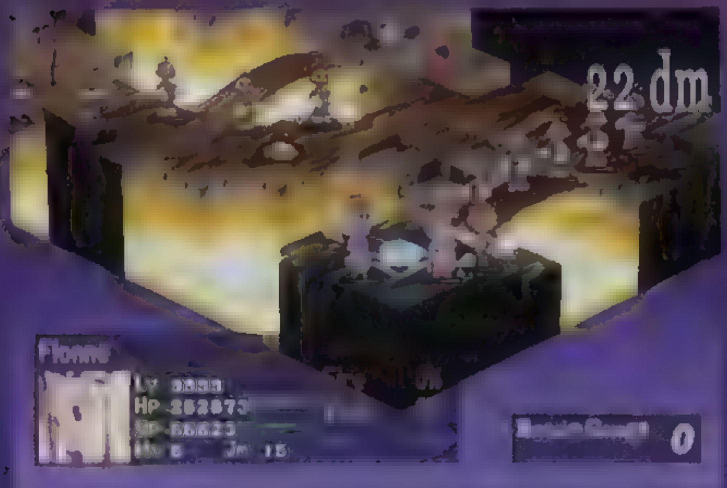


Nippon Ichi's reinvention of the strategy RPG turned micromanagement into open heart surgery, and placed a developer's power into the player's hands

Back in 2004, the strategy RPG [illegible] difficult one to break into with any kind of meaningful impact. *Advance Wars*, plus its sequel, provided a heady zenith not just for fans of turn-based warfare, but also anyone who treasured the GBA. Any forum thread that touched upon the genre would elicit heartfelt praise for established greats: various strains of *Tactics Ogre* and *Final Fantasy Tactics*. The template was already well represented, and well realised. Just how does a newcomer turn itself into a prime candidate without invoking changes that spoil the framework? In *Disgaea's* case, it doesn't. Oh, but it does...

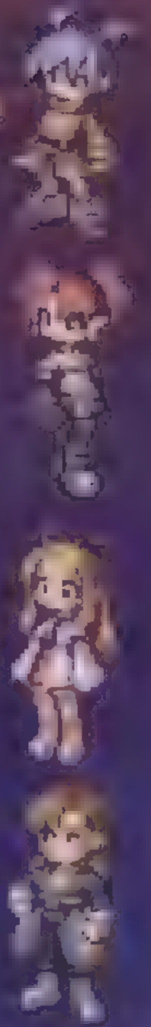
First, *Disgaea* isn't strictly a newcomer. Some of its characteristics are visible in previous Nippon Ichi productions – *Rhapsody: A Musical Adventure* on PS1, say, but most heavily in PS2 title *La Pucelle: Tactics*, which was released in the UK *after* *Disgaea*. But *Disgaea* is where Nippon Ichi's ideas took firmest and most confident root, so much so that they went on to power the evolutionary *Makai Kingdom*, before a true sequel appeared in 2006. On the surface, *Disgaea* doesn't appear at all iconoclastic. Colourfully kooky, perhaps, but its opening few hours can feel deceptively vanilla. Battle through a series of maps, nurture a team of mages, fighters and healers, savouring the occasional oddball cutscene as you go. But it's all just a front, a taster, a glimpse of the tip of the iceberg. *Disgaea* is not a simple game. Its deepest secrets are erudite indeed. Its inner workings aren't just legion; they also manage to ride a fine line between complexity and intricacy, and are yours to wield. *Disgaea* understands something that many more titles would do well to aspire to: handing the player the power of exploitation and improvisation needn't be game-breaking – it can, in fact, prove empowering and immersive to an enormous degree.

Disgaea is not a simple game. Its inner workings aren't just legion; they also manage to ride a fine line between complexity and intricacy



Whether a style decision or simply a lack of [illegible], *Disgaea's* maps are [illegible] boards, suspended in space. Which should, hopefully, coax a curiosity out of players: what happens if you throw an enemy off the edge?

For example: there is no difficulty curve in the traditional sense. Sure, there's a gradient of challenge if you're simply looking to sprint through the story and hit the ending, but that just won't happen. It's just too tempting to get snagged upon its myriad diversions. Soon, your goal isn't story-chapter progress but the accumulation of power, of cultivating characters of seemingly boundless strength, limited only by your willingness to tweak and your curiosity to subvert. Sure, you can approach it with a grind mentality, endlessly replaying maps in order to reap diminishing statistical rewards, but you'll only end up dulling yourself with such a robotic tail-chase, especially when *Disgaea* is tailored so heavily towards user-creative power-levelling.



Aside from the basic components of SRPG battling – and even within the threadbare components of moving and attacking, there's still wiggle room of which you can take canny advantage – *Disgaea* introduces two key laboratories: Item Worlds and The Dark Assembly. Item Worlds are a literal Wonderland: while the player has access to many

Warp
7
Bonus Gauge

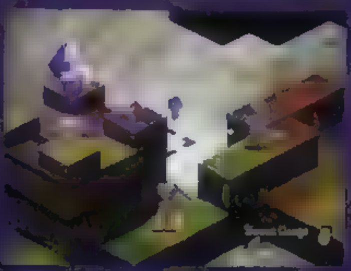
MODEL SOCIETY

While *Disgaea*'s main characters have their own special skills and strengths, they're buffered by a great raft of character classes. These are drip-fed through unlocking, and while only ten can be taken out on to the battlefield, many times that number can be created and cherry-picked as you venture into each stage. Levelling a given class opens up higher grades of character types while they can be created to several different specs depending on your mana resources. Monsters defeated in battle become available, while putting time in with fire, earth and ice casters will gradually result in access to Star, Prism and Galaxy mages. Fighters and warriors give way to scouts, ninjas, rogues and ronin. Of course, abounding character classes are hardly new to SRPGs, but the potential for fiddling and shaping them to your needs is *Disgaea*'s strength.

weapons and stat-boosting items to equip, every piece of kit can be entered. Each represents a multi-tiered, randomly generated dungeon in which each level feels like a truly unpredictable creation. Topography seemingly decided by a blind man taking a chainsaw to a lump of Styrofoam. Clusters of enemies scattered about like pizza toppings delivered from a shotgun. Exit doors that could be just two squares away from the entrance, or at the other side of the map, and requiring some thoughtful character stacking and throwing. Geo Panels – colour-coded area effects – make each stage look like the offspring of a chessboard and a disco ball. Any visit to the Item World could soon turn into a trawl, and dangerously so; players need a special item (the punning Mr Gency's Exit) to escape, or can only vacate after every tenth stage, establishing a checkpoint for their return.

Every time you uncover something new, you're only at the precipice of understanding how it all feeds into everything else. It thrives on meddling

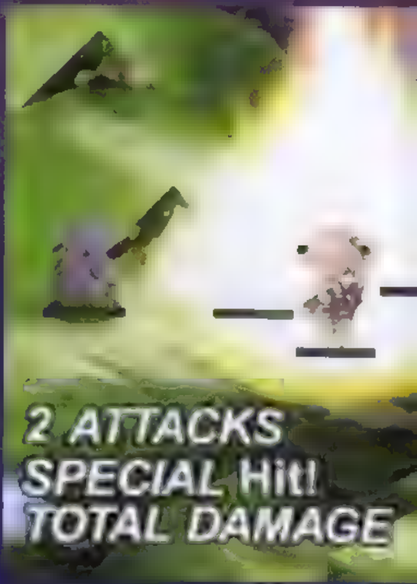
Item Worlds offer a greater harvest than mere character training. Some of the best kit in the game is to be found at their most pressurised depths. And with each stage the player descends into an item, the more its stat ratings are boosted. Most importantly, however, are an item's residents – neutral characters who, once subdued, allow weapons and other equipment to be enhanced; moreover, they can even be exported to slots in other equipment at your whim. So, dedicate yourself to gathering a squad of Statisticians – specialists that provide exp bonuses – and suddenly you've a sword that can reap great long-haul rewards when bulking up a character. [illegible]



Coloured squares dictate Geo Panels' areas of influence, which are decided by the placement of Geo Stones. Stones can be destroyed to change the colour of Panels, and ignite hugely damaging chain reactions

[illegible] Through this, new character classes can be opened, better shop inventories introduced, or even new high-level worlds unlocked. Most technical, however, is transmigration, the option to reincarnate a character at level one, retaining a number of skills and certain stat enhancements, allowing them to become increasingly potent for less levelling. Game-breaking? In some eyes, sure. But *Disgaea*'s just not that kind of game. It's an upbeat, vibrant, mathematical chew toy in which, every time you uncover something new, you're only at the precipice of understanding how it all feeds into everything else. It thrives on meddling.

You're told that characters can pick objects up and throw them. What if you tried picking up an ally, or an enemy? What if you throw enemies into one another? What if you throw one into the base panel from which you summon your squad? What if you pick up a character that has already picked up another character? What if you throw an enemy on to a Geostone, the coloured pyramids that dictate the [illegible] question, you'll often be given a new tool with which to reinvent, however slightly, the way you play, a ploy that can reap an enormous payoff when smartly applied. It's a Nintendo trademark, almost, this sensation that [illegible]



TOTAL DAMAGE

Joining asset-slim classics such as Rez, Gradius V and Frequency, Disgaea was released in the UK on CD thanks to the omission of a Japanese voice track. Disgaea 2 rectified this, but the series sorely needs an option to silence the cursor ping on the menus.

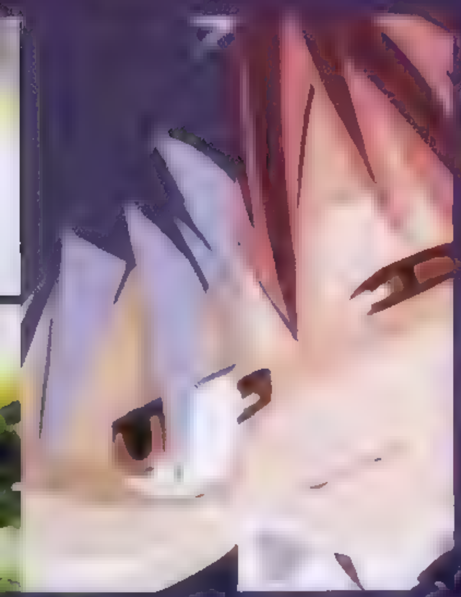
TOTAL DAMAGE

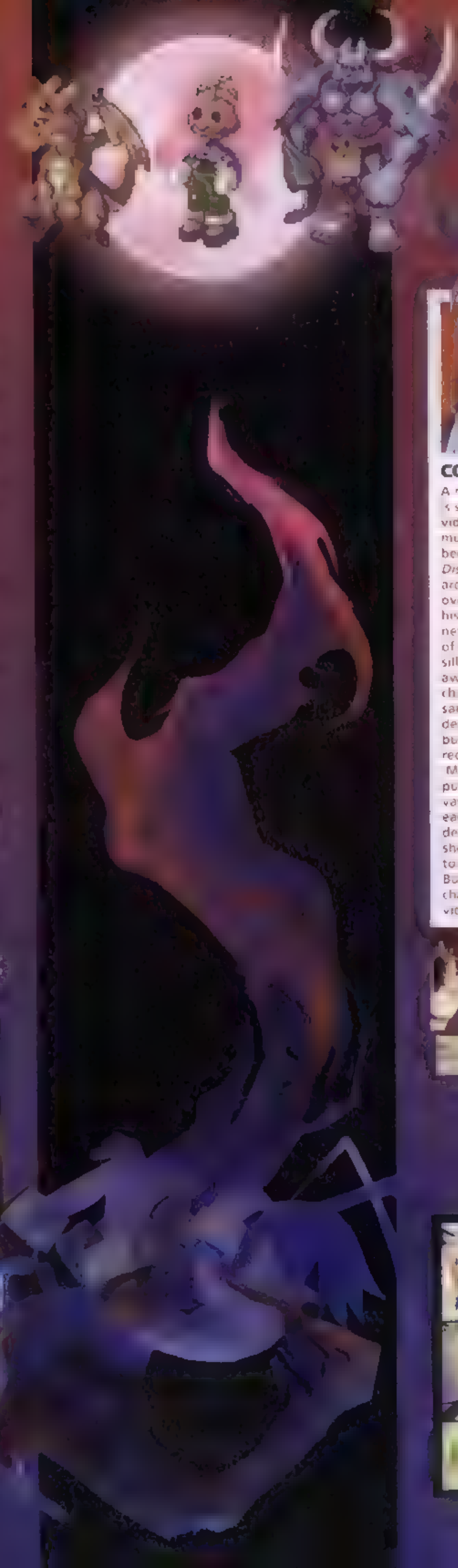
depth in a meal for one, *Disgaea* is also a good example of an enormous but unwritten social aspect of gaming: sharing. Gamers love to geek-gossip. Nothing can quite stoke or refuel a player's enthusiasm for a title quite like having trusted friends rattle off an informal ramble outlining the tips and techniques they've been discovering or brandishing. The encyclopaedic repository of GameFAQs' text files may well offer exhaustive explanation of the game's most obscure formulae, but it can't beat the illumination that comes from the swapshop show-and-tell that occurs between friends. It's also great guidance for when SRPG RSI sets in, which can often happen when you've lost yourself down a back alley of low-profit number-crunching, of grinding

without finding. It can happen, of course. While *Disgaea* may be an exemplary SRPG that epitomises the upside of an open-source mentality, going it truly alone runs the risk of getting snarled up in an aimless slog. It's one thing for a game to feature giddying depths, but a whole other thing for it to explicitly 'fess up to it; tearing up the rule book may be a laudable deed, but can count for little if the replacement pages are too blank. Even solo experiences need community to best digest them, and *Disgaea*'s deep strengths underscore it.

But even with a fully featured guide in tow, trying to understand *Disgaea* in one big gulp will result in computational heartburn; it's like trying to make sense of an abacus whose threads of wire travel in a dozen different directions and the counters keep changing value. But, with care and caution, it can slow-burn to the point of cooking even the most restless of brains. As it turns out, Nippon Ichi didn't actually break into the SRPG scene with any kind of splash; it tunnelled under the map and decided to take hold of the very foundations, scoring itself some victorious turf by turning

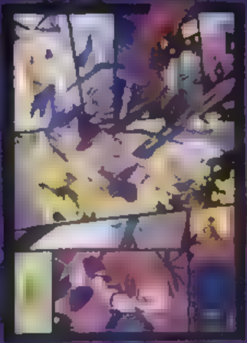
A selection of advanced worlds can be unlocked through The Dark Assembly. These include Prinny World, Cave of Ordeals and Alternate Netherworld and often host some perversely tough opposition.





COMEDIC DEMONIC

A ripe sense of humour is still too rare within videogames, given how much it can flatter and beckon players. While *Disgaea* has a main story arc – centred on rising overlord Prince Laharl and his bid to conquer the netherworld – it has no fear of deviating for the sake of silliness, exhibiting self-awareness or introducing characters purely for the sake of parody. Item descriptions are throwaway but lovable one-liners. A recurring demon nicknamed 'Mid Boss' makes for a wry putdown indeed. Laharl's vassal, Etna, introduces each chapter with her own deluded, fantasist skit. Why should these things matter to an SRPG? They don't. But such strength of character matters a lot to videogames, full stop.



THE
THING

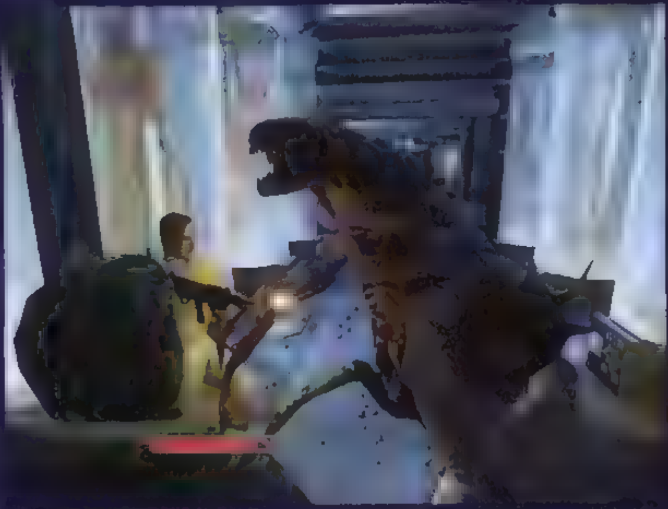
THE MAKING OF...

THE THING

Squad-based shooters got their first taste of paranoia as a UK developer created a sequel to John Carpenter's cold day in hell

FORMAT **PC, PS2, XBOX** PUBLISHER **VIVENDI** DEVELOPER **COMPUTER ARTWORKS** ORIGIN **UK** RELEASE **2002**

Blood on snow, axes buried in a frozen doorpost, a dog's head splitting open like the petals of a flower: as a videogame licence, *The Thing* is intriguing but unconventional. John Carpenter's story of shape-shifting alien infection descending on the crew of an Antarctic research station carefully rations imaginative and oddly lovable splatter while also creating a taut psychodrama. Though it satisfies the guns-and-monsters credentials for a thirdperson shooter, the strength of the 1982 film lies not just with the horrific special effects transformations, as humans turn into alien freaks, but in more problematic territory for games: the mistrust that grows in a situation where anybody could turn out to be a monster in disguise. Throw in the fact that the film is two decades old, and that its ending is a near-perfect piece of polished ambiguity which has long proved sequel-proof, and that simple sojourn into a world of monster closets begins to look a lot more complicated.



The Thing's 'whodunnit investigation' structure fits perfectly into the survival horror template, even if its low-key sense of humour and memorable characters are harder to carry across from film to videogame

So it's apt that Computer Artworks, the developer which finally took up the licence, was intriguing but unconventional too. As the name suggests, the company founded in 1993 by pioneering digital artist **William Latham** started out a long way from videogames, providing unnerving computer visuals for acts like The Shamen, and creating the immensely successful Organic Art application.

Feeling the lure of more complex projects, Latham's company eventually left such abstract work behind to create PC game *Evolva* in 2000. A thirdperson action title featuring a genetic engineering character-upgrading system, *Evolva* was an ambitious project for a company starting out in games. "The types of deals in those days were more healthy," says Latham. "Virgin, the publishers, were keen on innovation, and *Evolva* did lots of innovative stuff like picture-in-picture and being able to switch between characters."

> "Eventually, we had to spend a lot of time constraining what the player could do so that the game made sense"

Such a focus on pushing boundaries was to become a recurring theme for Computer Artworks as, acknowledges Latham, were the difficulties inherent in such a focus. While *Evolva* promised the prospect of freeform mutation, the team discovered that if the experience was too open-ended, the player could lose their way. "Eventually we had to spend a lot of time constraining what the player could do so that the game made sense."

Computer Artworks carried little original code over from *Evolva* to *The Thing*, and had to create a new physics engine when Havok proved too buggy. Developing for PS2 as well as the more natural partnership of PC and Xbox also caused headaches

Antarctic blizzards provide the perfect justification for a fragile draw distance, but could make exploring extremely difficult. John Carpenter appeared at E3 in 2002 to sign copies of the game for the crowd

SNOWBLIND

Many players were frustrated by *The Thing*'s lack of an onscreen map, which, when coupled with a system which sees you losing health after long periods outside, could make exploration an infuriating process. "The map was discussed a lot," admits Latham. "And particularly when we did the Japanese version of the game, they said 'We definitely need a map'. Its absence was a deliberate design choice to give a slight claustrophobic feel where you didn't know what was going to happen. As for freezing to death outside, that's what happens in the Antarctic."

Evolva cemented Computer Artworks' reputation as a developer with a special skill for disturbing imagery – just the kind of team Universal was looking for to develop a videogame sequel to The Thing. In turn, Latham was delighted to find a project that allowed him to continue experimenting, but with the backing of a strong commercial IP. It was this dynamic which would define the game.

If Latham was worried about the pressures a huge publisher and a mainstream licence might bring to his individual and rather cerebral company, he hid it well. It helped that it was Universal which chose Computer Artworks in the first place, largely on the strength of Latham's own previous work, and this respect and understanding of the developer's skills seems to have been in evidence throughout production. "[Universal] were very good to work with," says Latham. "They told us to come up with original ideas. It wasn't like a Harry Potter licence. There weren't strict guidelines, as long as we retained the quality of the original work."

Universal wanted a true sequel, with a story that took place shortly after the film's climax. Quickly, a basic plot was outlined and the gameplay started to emerge: a squad-based shooter in which the player would lead a rescue mission to Outpost 31.

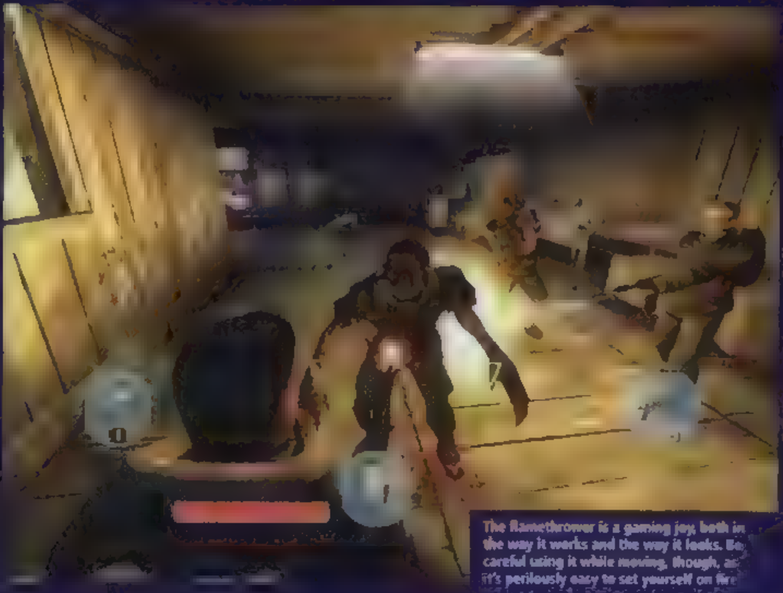
"I'm reasonably happy with the story," says Latham. "One of the problems with game production is time. There are a couple of passes on the script and then: wham! You're straight into production. One of the most sensible things I did was get a very good storyboard artist, Paul Catling, to do visualisations of what the game would look like. The story then came out of a dialogue between Andrew Curtis, the design lead, and producer Chris Hadley." Between them, Hadley and Curtis would settle on an ingenious solution to the problem of the film's ending, in which the last two survivors of Outpost 31 sit out a mistrustful stalemate, each suspecting the other to be an alien impostor. The first level of the game reveals a single frozen body, leaving the question of what became of the other survivor to ferment in the player's mind and urge them forwards.

As the team entered development, the game's central concept came into focus: the player's need to constantly keep morale high among his AI teammates, giving them ammo or weapons to keep them calm, testing them for alien infection, and ensuring that nothing in his own behaviour makes them suspect him of being an alien himself. "It was early days for squad-based games, and the fear, trust and infection mechanic was quite innovative for the time," says Latham. "It came from very early meetings where we all watched the film to come up with brand identifiers. We decided there should be a novel AI element that mimicked what happened within the film: you never know who's going to turn."

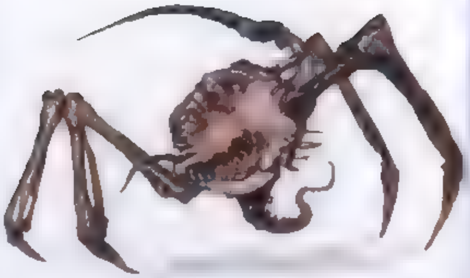
This idea would lift the game above a simple shooting title. "Originally, the game was going to be a lot more open and dynamic: any event could happen," says Latham. Ultimately, however, as with *Evolva*, the developers found themselves reining in an innovative idea that was starting to threaten a coherent experience. "We had to scale it back," sighs Latham. "There were a few cheats to make it entertaining. We tried to mimic human behaviour, but at the end of the day it didn't matter too much how you treated your teammates."

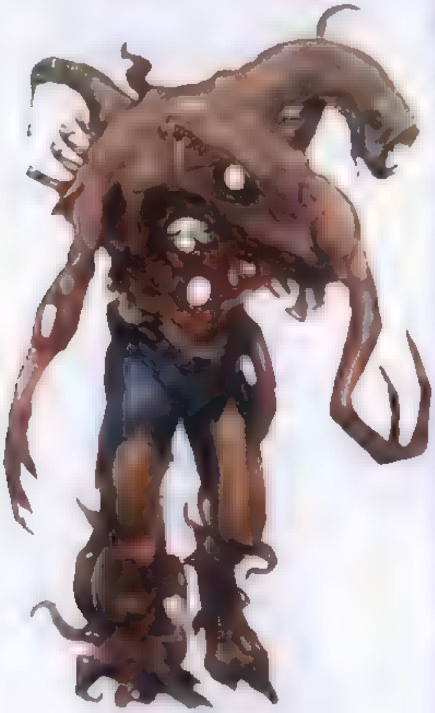
It's tempting to see such 'cheats' as the result of publisher pressure, but Computer Artworks itself was the driving force behind the changes. Admitting that the team had ignored, to their detriment, a lot of the playtesting feedback they received on *Evolva*, Latham was determined not to let things get over-complicated this

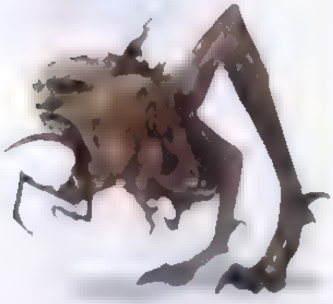
> "We tried to mimic human behaviour, but at the end of the day it didn't matter too much how you treated your teammates"

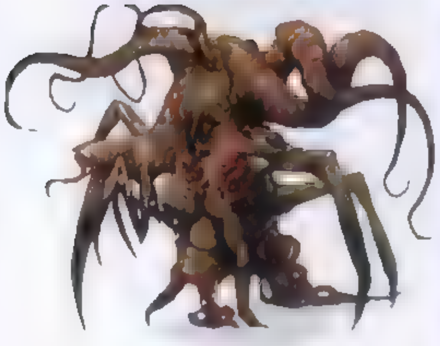


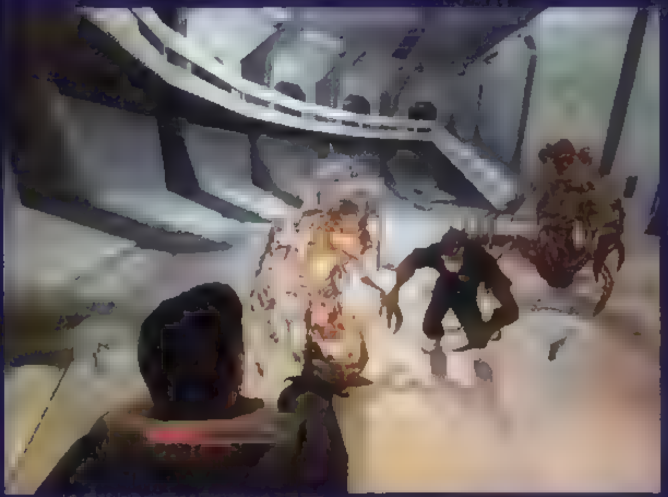
The flamethrower is a gaming joy, both in the way it works and the way it looks. Be careful using it while moving, though, as it's perilously easy to set yourself on fire









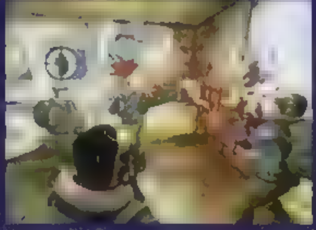


Even in its scaled-down state, the AI had to do a lot of the title's heavy lifting. Latham admits that it was a risk to create a game in which so much of the experience depended on the behaviour of NPCs

time: "UK developers are famous for innovation, but in the longer term that hasn't been to the UK's advantage. The consumer doesn't always want that extreme level of innovation. Computer Artworks was always pushing the boundary, but in some cases we'd push it too far, and the fear, trust, infection mechanism was a case in point."

Despite such issues, the finished game is clever and compelling. The slow opening is perfectly paced to create a sense of claustrophobic dread, and even given the limitations imposed on the AI system or the scripted set-piece transformations as NPCs erupt into aliens at specific moments, the suspicion created when a new potential teammate appears is a more than ample reward. More importantly, the cabin fever of the original film is captured beautifully. While the hardware placed limitations on the degree of flesh-tearing horror Latham's team could create, the excellent art direction, with its eloquently suggestive tableau of hours-old bloodstains, echoes the film.

"I think given what the technology allowed I'm very pleased with the game," says Latham. "It's one of those games that people still talk about, and other games have imitated the AI mechanisms. In the industry people are still aware of it. It is of the period, but I think it still holds its own." It was inevitable, though, that *The Thing* would pay a price for being ahead of its time, particularly in its original aim to have AI-driven NPCs really affecting the storyline. "It would be interesting to have a crack at it on PS3 today with procedural technology," says Latham, wistfully. "But there's always that balance. You give the player the option to wander left and right, but you're ultimately taking them down a funnel to guarantee some kind of story element."



The muted art design is excellent at providing a sense of claustrophobia. Crashed helicopters and dead bodies ramp up the sense of isolation

***The Thing* sold** over one million copies, topping charts in the UK and Germany. However, despite its success, Computer Artworks closed its doors in 2003, a year after the game's release. "We finished *The Thing* and there was a gap before we signed any other products. Because things were slow, we then signed a number of other deals that we probably shouldn't have. A classic scenario."

Compounding that, the relationship between publishers and developers was changing. Quite a few other UK developers went bust that year. Creators of games, unless they're big-league, have become service providers. In the film world, the director might have a lot of clout – in the game world creative control is passed back and forth depending on how the publisher feels."

Today, Latham is still working in the liminal zone between art and entertainment. As founder of Games Audit, he offers project management services for the videogame industry, applying the lessons learned from managing Creative Artworks. As a professor of computing at Goldsmiths College, he also teaches an MSC course in games and entertainment programming, while heading various research projects. "One thing I've learnt is that you need to draw a distinction between entertainment and research and art," Latham concludes. "I've gone back to the research and art side. We're doing a project with Imperial College, taking DNA sequences and presenting novel types of visualisations." While this is bioinformatics rather than game design, it's applying game programming techniques with the potential aim of creating new medicines. "We've written software which simulates the way proteins fold, which has implications for cancer," says Latham. "From my point of view I'm back doing innovative work. Some of the morphological aspects which were represented in entertainment form in *The Thing*, I'm now investigating in the real world."

FAVOURITE THINGS

Where the film features a madly inventive array of mutated alien forms, ranging from a stomach wound that can bite through a man's arms to a head that sprouts spider legs, the videogame opts for a loose collection of monster types. At one end of the spectrum are the Scuttlers, reminiscent of *Half-Life*'s much-beloved Headcrabs. At the other end are the Thing Beasts, which have to be wounded by gunfire before being torched with the flamethrower.

Step into the light

Geomerics kickstarts its vision of realtime game lighting with the launch of Enlighten

[illegible] interactions, Enlighten also works well with strong static lights and [illegible] coming in windows

www.geomerics.com

Pointing out where game developers are going wrong is a traditional part of the delicate [illegible]stick dance carried out by middleware companies trying to persuade said developers to use their technology. To that degree, it's no surprise when Geomerics' chief technical officer **Jules Davis** starts to stress the problems developers have to deal with when it comes to getting the correct look throughout a game.

"Everyone underestimates the amount of time it takes to do game lighting," he argues. "The amount of money spent on lighting can be a bottomless pit." The reason, he says, is that entire games can often end up being re-lit two or three times during development.

"Lighting is often the most important visual part of game," Davis explains. "Lighting is what gives a game its look. It's not the textures per se, it's the way they and the various maps interact, especially in terms of dynamic lighting."

Usually this sort of sales pitch could be taken with a pinch of salt. The difference this time is Davis is talking from his own previous experiences as the technical director of UK studio Kuju.

"There are two basic lighting models currently used in games," he continues. "One is an approximation to real lighting where you have lots of strong lights and lots of dark shadows but not much subtlety in between, let alone control over the colour and atmosphere. The more common approach now is to pre-compute all your lighting offline and bake it into your levels, so everything looks gorgeous until you add dynamic lights. Then scenes start to look a little odd because the normal maps aren't working well and you lose your specularity."

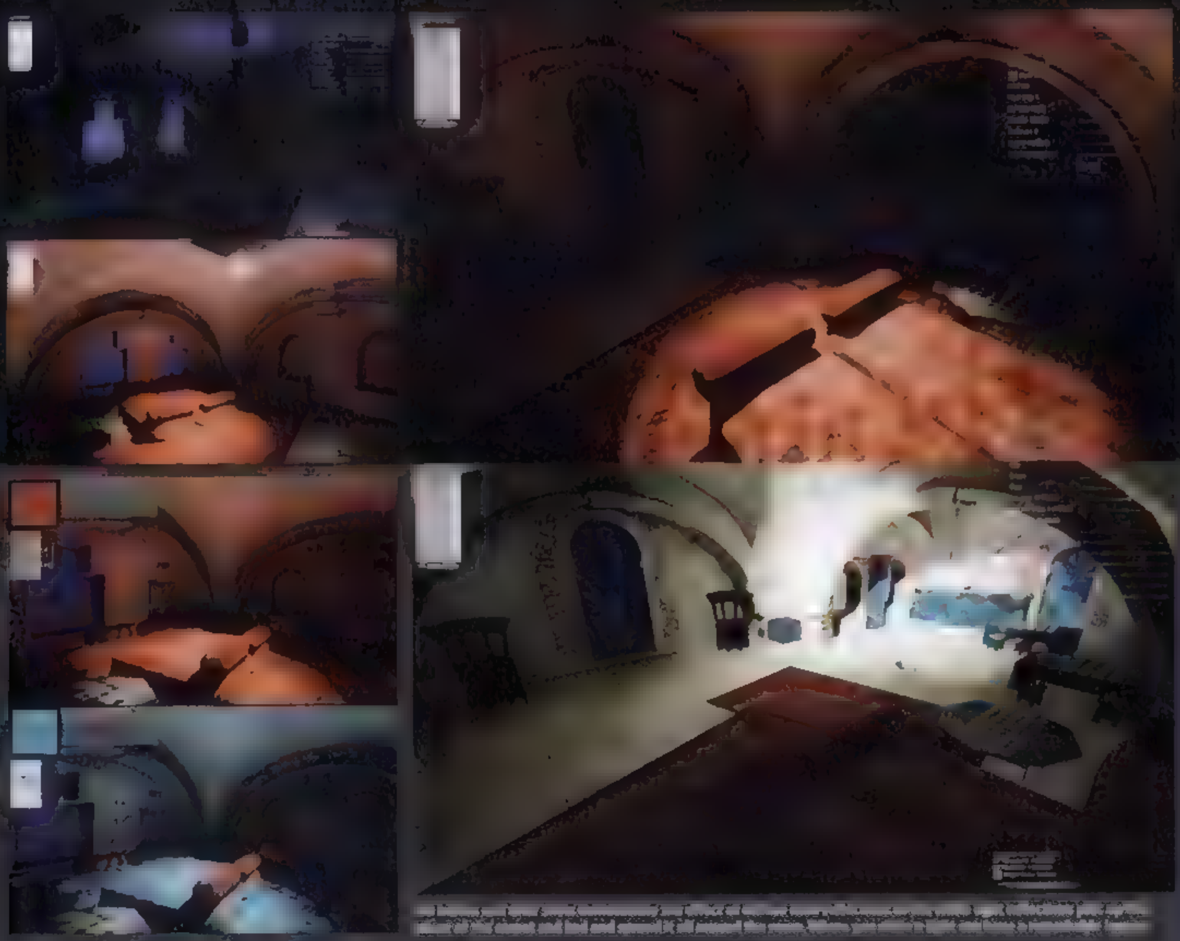
Obviously, according to Davis, the solution is Geomerics' just-released realtime lighting solution Enlighten.

Thanks to its use of a novel form of mathematics called geometric algebra (over which the Cambridge University spin-off holds several patents), it enables developers to take the first step in unifying these two approaches.

It's not magic, though. For one thing, using Enlighten requires developers to reallocate some of their CPU budget to this new form of lighting. Davis won't be drawn on exact figures, which depend on resolution and scene complexity, but says the order of five per cent at 30 frames per second or better is achievable.

Still, one of the benefits of using geometric algebra is it works well on processors such as PlayStation 3's SPUs, Xbox 360's CPU cores or common-or-garden Intel multiple cores, as well as

Taken from one of the rooms in Geomeric's Enlighten GDC demo, the subtleties of light and shadow the engine can create are clear to see. As well as realistic looking lighting set-ups, Enlighten can equally be used to create [illegible]



[illegible]

more esoteric platforms such as Nvidia's CUDA and the possible technology behind the next consoles from Sony and Microsoft, Intel's many-cored Larrabee.

It's perhaps ironic, though, that Enlighten currently requires its own pre-compute step before the realtime lighting – technically realtime diffuse inter-reflections – is available. This is so Enlighten can understand the game's geometry and pass this information to its runtime engine in a form it understands. Eventually Geomerics hopes to convert this to a realtime process, however.

More importantly, though, the technology itself is designed to be as accessible as possible. "It's not some sort of monolithic engine," Davis explains. "It's a small, modular API that's scalable and flexible so developers have control over the quality of their output and the performance overhead."

And it's this promise of control that's likely to be the fulcrum of Enlighten's future success or failure. Once integrated within a developer's pipeline, it's designed to be an artist-focused tool in terms of day-to-day use.

"It will enable artists to iterate their materials and lighting in realtime, which makes an enormous difference in terms of how quickly they can come up with something stunning and unique," Davis points out.

For example, studios which are currently pre-computing and then baking their lights into their levels often have to wait hours for the renders to be crunched through, and only then do any problems become known. Davis says that even if Enlighten is just used to replace this offline process, the productivity improvements would be significant.

"If you have to wait even ten minutes to tweak your lighting, not only does it have an impact in terms of time but quality too because you can't immediately tweak it to get it right," he says. "Using Enlighten, you get higher quality art, and there's no waiting around for updates and you're using your artists more efficiently, so you're winning twice."

Another important factor in this regard is the way that, while Enlighten could make in-game lighting look more realistic, it can equally be used to make it completely unrealistic. "Realism is a side-effect of Enlighten," Davis says. "If an artist wants a wall to reflect light unrealistically, such as a red reflection off a white wall, they will have control over those sorts of options."

Neatly, this also means that no matter how many games use Enlighten, there shouldn't be a characteristic look – something that has been an issue in the past with less flexible middleware.

But, of course, the final validation will only come with industry acceptance. A small set of key partners have been using a pre-release version of the technology, with a commercial release expected in March. As part of Epic's Integrated Partner Program, Geomerics will also be integrating Enlighten into the Unreal 3 Engine. This means that the first games using Enlighten could be in stores by the end of 2008, although early 2009 is a more likely timeframe, and then we'll know if the [illegible] behind Enlighten really do shine.

> **"It makes an enormous difference in terms of how quickly artists can come up with something stunning"**

Reflected glory

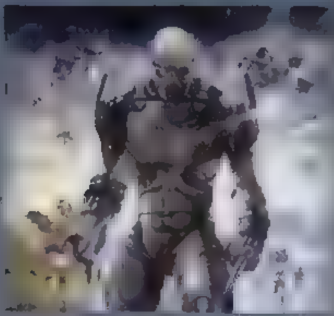
Enlighten is an engine for working out diffuse inter-reflections in realtime – that is the effect of lights bouncing off of a diffuse, or uneven, surface that scatters light rays in all directions. These are important components of lighting, especially in terms of providing atmosphere, because as well as providing subtle shadowing, the reflections carry the colour of walls and furnishings. The calculation process is very complex, especially in terms of working out the effects of secondary, tertiary, and further, reflections.

"Originally we thought that only two or three reflections were important, but it turned out we were decaying the light energy for each reflection too quickly," Davis reveals. "Modelling it correctly, it turns out that you need more bounces and the bounces have a more significant impact on the overall scene, so now we can handle infinite bounces. It makes things much more tricky because when you turn a light off, you have to be able to update the reflections very quickly."

Another important component of the reflections Enlighten models is the directionality of light. This matters because techniques such as normal maps rely on the directionality of incoming light in order to function properly.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev



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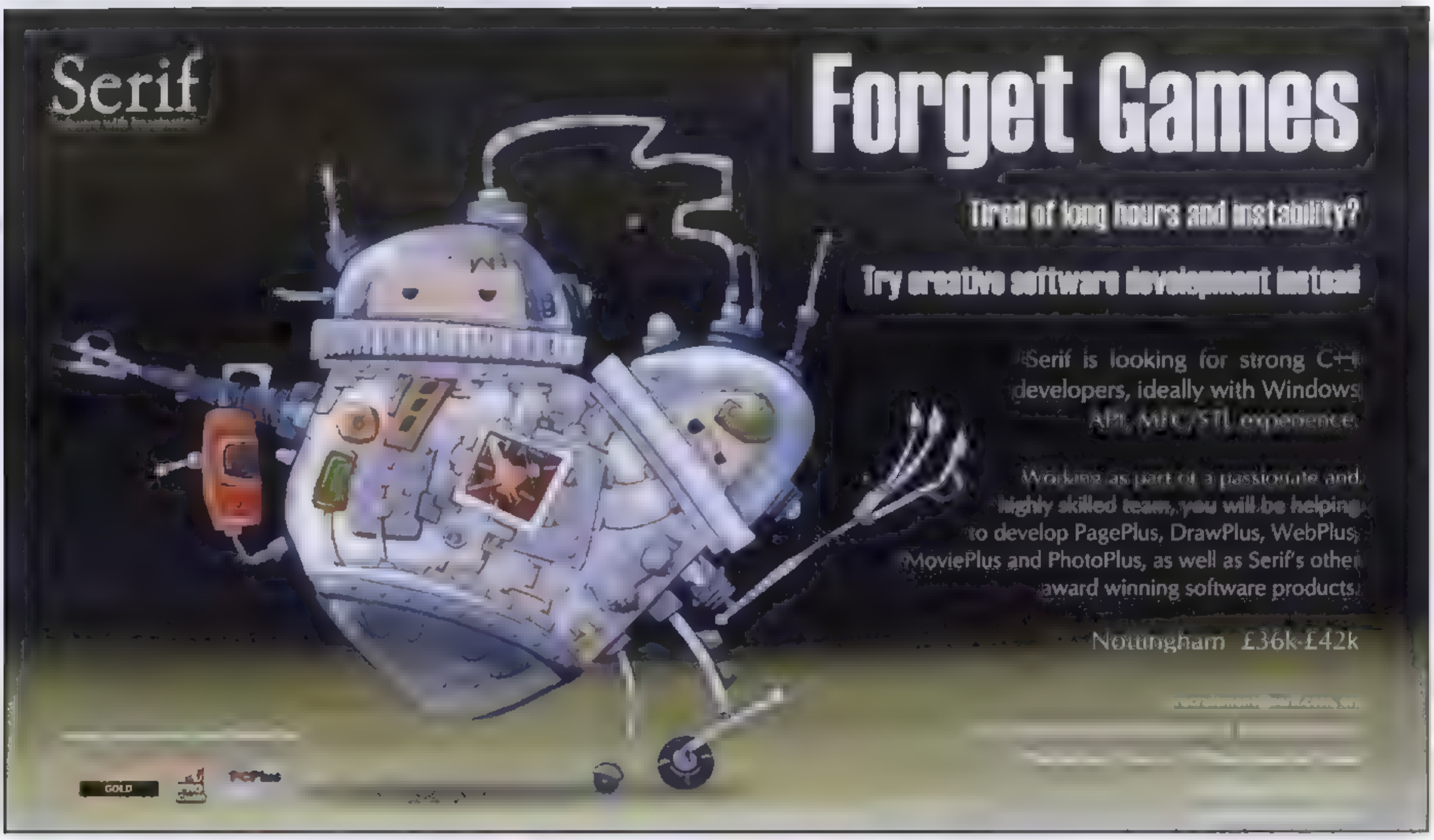
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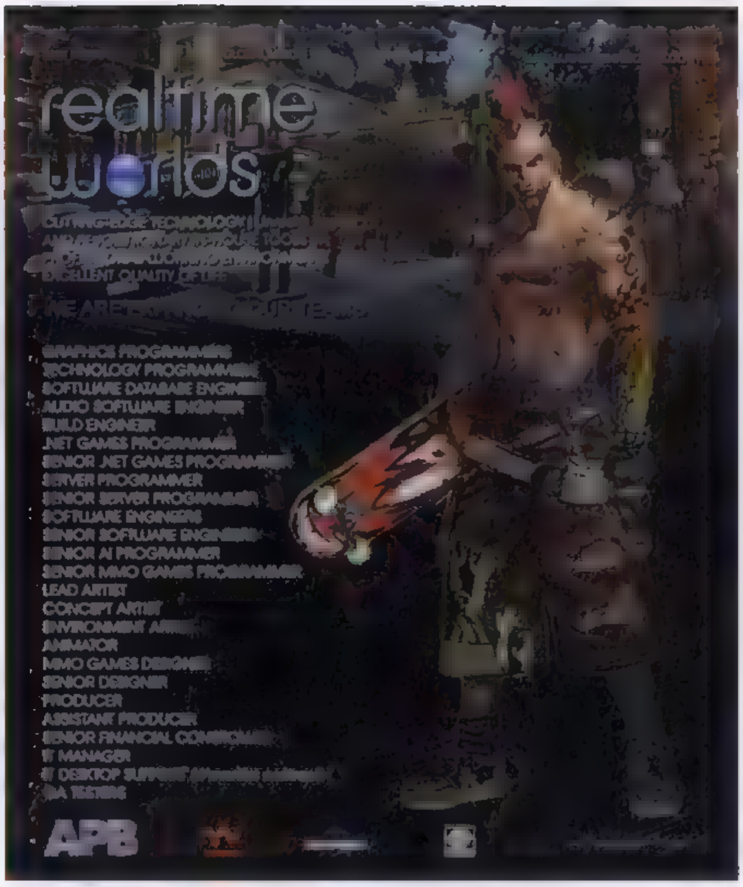
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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK

...because people refuse to see

Here we are, a month after my last column, and I've still got innovation on the brain. This time, however, I come to the subject not brimming with confidence, but rather partially riddled with guilt, thanks to my pre-release experience with Bizarre Creations' *The Club*. I've been sceptically optimistic – or is that optimistically sceptical? – from the moment I first got wind of it. But after playing the review build (singleplayer only, at the time of writing), my scepticism evaporated, replaced by the kick of what Bizarre hath wrought.

The Club is a new take on an old genre three parts shooter to one part racer, shaken rather than stirred and strained through an arcade filter – and the team has somehow made it work. I've always found that shooters, more than other games, induce in me a low level of stress. But by eliminating the deliberate vibe that has come to typify many modern AAA shooters and replacing it with a hectic pace – both in terms of movement (get from A to B to C and so on as fast as you can) and pressure (keep shooting enemies and signage to maintain your combo meter or extend time on the ever-ticking countdown clock) – every play session with *The Club* jacks up my baseline stress levels to new heights. In fact, it feels less like a thirdperson shooter and more like a twin-stick shooter, but with the added challenge of navigating a complex 3D space rather than a flat 2D one. What *Stranglehold* could only aspire to be, *The Club* actually is, taking well-worn gameplay mechanics and making them feel thrillingly new.

> The Club feels less like a thirdperson shooter and more like a twin-stick shooter, but with the added challenge of a complex 3D space

Still, I can't help but feel as though something important is missing: a certain style, mood, panache. Let's be clear: I'm not looking for depth or meaning. *The Club* doesn't need a terrific story or compelling characters. But the overall experience feels more like an early '90s arcade game that Sega never made, rather than a balls-to-the-wall Jerry-Bruckheimer-by-way of David Fincher movie that hovers just out of reach of the finished product, more throwaway than essential. Why? There's a certain generic quality to the character designs and the environments. The enemy chatter is thoroughly uninspired. The ragdoll physics are perfunctory, as are the melee combat and the weapon sounds. The end result is that none of these elements truly sell the violence that we're being asked to commit. This, then, is the source of my guilt. I like *The Club*, but I don't love it because I feel as though they've left something vital on the table. But if the game's mechanics are great, shouldn't that be enough to earn it my unalloyed praise?

My point here isn't to simply advocate flashy visuals for flashy visuals' sake, but to suggest that the best games boast the correct interplay between the two. The first couple of *Burnout* titles hadn't quite got it right, resulting in an odd disconnect. The basic racing gameplay required you to avoid crashing, but while your eyes were being stimulated by the spectacular crashes – which rightfully distinguished *Burnout* and *Burnout 3: Point Of Impact* from their more pedestrian rivals – their occurrence was an indication of failure rather than success. It wasn't until the third entry that Criterion Games finally got it right, thanks to its now-signature takedown system, which not only turned *Burnout* into a vehicular fighting game, but also transformed crashes from mere flourishes into vital gameplay by feeding successful takedowns into the boost meter.

What's surprising about the absence of genuine style from *The Club* is that *Geometry Wars* proves that Bizarre understands its importance. That title's rock-solid gameplay would be gripping with 8bit Xs and Os, but the riot of colour, sparks, explosions and distortion, to say nothing of the insistent score, have elevated both the original game and its sequel to deservedly exalted status. In taking its visual and stylistic cues primarily from Sega's arcade past rather than modern classics, *The Club* feels more disposable than it should. It has *Gears Of Wars'* roadie run, but it could use the visceral punch of a wider array of one-button contextual moves: slamming into cover, sliding under low obstacles, and a better dive roll. It has the pace of a *Burnout*, but it would benefit from death animations that are as spectacular as those in Criterion's racer, with the occasional use of slo-mo and quick zooms to punctuate a well-executed kill. The environments ought to be not only more moody – either more plausibly squalid like *Manhunt*, or boldly striking like *BioShock* – but our gunplay should also make them erode and come apart in a more explosive fashion, as in Criterion's *Black*. From *Call Of Duty 4*, I'd love to see a couple of night-vision maps or sections, just to mix things up. I may sound like a downer, but I'm saying these things because I believe that Bizarre is on the cusp of something genuinely special. By embracing these superficially superficial elements, perhaps the sequel will make it all the way there.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup

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BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY

Videogame design, etc

In the bulky (read, could easily serve double duty as a yacht anchor) user manual that came with 1990's *SimEarth*, Will Wright included a section entitled Simulation Limitations and Biases in which he took pains to explain that the theories around which the game were based weren't necessarily accepted scientific fact. Whenever I think back on reading that manual as a sheltered farm boy, I remember concluding that the developers were warning me that their simulation had an opinion. How can a simulation have an opinion, and why might anyone care?

Here's a fun one to answer at a party: "What do you do for a living?" which, when not dodged, invariably leads to the following: "You mean you make the graphics?" "Oh, then you write the story?" "Must be you do the programming?" "So, what do you DO?"

Game designers craft possibility spaces. Well, we do a lot of things, like draw top-down maps, and tune properties on virtual objects, and present diagrams in PowerPoint that are alternately too detailed or too abstract to explain much, and email each other links to really funny and astonishing YouTube videos. But when we are engaged in the act of editing a videogame's design towards an aesthetic target, we are crafting possibility spaces. This is the accurate answer, although in practice it does little to conclude those party conversations expediently and with an air of satisfied closure.

'Possibility space' isn't exactly a term at the forefront of public consciousness. Fox News doesn't even exhibit reliable command over the specifics of whether *Mass Effect* drenches players in a relentless fire hose of full-frontal alien nudity and interactive graphic sex from a selection on the main menu called Corrupt Your Children, or whether the situation is a little more nuanced than that. So it's hardly a surprise that a technical design term in limited circulation has failed to elucidate widely. 'Possibility space' refers to the full range of experience the game affords, from the obvious button pushes all the way out to the furthest frontiers of multiple rare events coinciding unexpectedly. What is possible in the game world and how can the player interact with it?

Marc LeBlanc (Google '8 kinds of fun') pioneered the MDA Framework, which describes some seminal concepts on how possibility spaces are created and modified. Mechanics (M) are the static rules of the game world, such as 'when the leader is knocked out, the rest of the pack scatters'. When the software is running, the Mechanics lead to Dynamics (D), such as 'players often attempt to knock out the leader as quickly as possible', and those Dynamics produce Aesthetic (A) responses such as 'I feel like a calculating hunter trying to identify and take down the leader in a quick surgical strike'. As designers, if that's not quite the aesthetic we were hoping for, we follow the chain back and adjust the mechanics. How would it be different if there were no way to identify the leader until the pack responds to his defeat? What dynamics would that produce and how would it feel?

It's important that this control exists. In my last column I argued that games are art because they have aesthetic qualities, but so do sunsets. It seals the deal to demonstrate that the designer has the power to make changes on his end of the connection which produce desired aesthetic results on the player's end. Few people would argue that designers deliberately change videogames, so if you buy all that sentimental stuff from last time about how a well-designed game captures and shares expressions about human experience, then you're sold.

If anything, people usually have trouble believing that a possibility space can contain an aesthetic, because a possibility space describes not one fixed play experience but many possible ones. If the designer does not know exactly what players are experiencing, how can he have made an aesthetic statement? The answer is that a well-crafted possibility space constrains experiences to within an understood range. As the player explores by playing, the fixed shape, structure and boundaries of the possibility space emerge. Imagine a game in which every friendship you begin eventually collapses after one of you feels forced into being dishonest. As you spot the pattern and struggle unsuccessfully to break it, you realise the designer has made a grim comment about human relationships by describing what is possible in his game, what range of stories can be expressed through the players' choices and actions.

In *SimEarth*, I explored a simulation of not only the planetary and human forces that shape Earth but their inherent interconnectedness. It cemented my fascination with nature and sold me on the theory that these normally self-regulating systems could be thrown out of equilibrium by human activity. Long before An Inconvenient Truth, and without ever stating a political opinion, *SimEarth* was capable of turning farm boys into the kind of raging environmentalists that Republicans and oil barons find especially hateful.

> [illegible]

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg

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BIFFOVISION [illegible]

The *Assassin's Creed* effect

As you've already been told (once a year since at least 1994), the last 12 months constituted the biggest year ever for videogames (unless you were Sony, in which case it was the biggest year ever for failed attempts to pump water from the bowels of your sinking PR barge). A recent Biffofamily get-together was evidence of this, notable for the regrettable fact that barely any of my relations spoke to one another. They just sat on their fat arses communicating via Pictochat, and competing on *42 All-Time Classics*.

Between *Mario Galaxy*, *BioShock*, *The Orange Box*, *Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* and *Call Of Duty 4*, I probably added the most games in the best part of a decade to my fictional Dungeon o' Game Love. Heck, I don't remember a year so defined by videogames since whichever birthday it was that I first got a Game Boy, and my father choked to death on a *Tetris* cartridge

> Let us make 2008 the year when redundant cutscenes, dull training levels and endless talky opening bits are consigned to the dustbin

Whether you're an arthritic, borderline senile 60-something, a girlie with a pony fixation or a hardcore gaming zealot with self esteem issues who has never met any of his friends in person, you've never had it so good. However, he says, puncturing the euphoria as effectively as a flaming porcupine attempting to mate with the Hindenburg, we're not there yet.

As I'm still working my way through the 2007 backlog, there are a couple of games I've been playing quite a bit of late: *Assassin's Creed* and *Mass Effect*. Despite a mixed critical reaction they're not bad games, but in both instances I almost gave up in the first half hour of 'play'. It was only the urging of friends that kept me plugging through their interminably dull openings. I'm glad I did, but – by gawd – they don't half make you work for the meat. Imagine a pork pie with a four-mile-thick crust, soused in an ocean of tramp-strength turpentine, and you wouldn't even be close.

I'm all for games easing you in, and hand-holding you through an invisible tutorial, but in the cases of *Assassin's Creed* and *Mass Effect* that isn't what's happening. If you think of them as action movies, it'd be like opening the entire Star Wars saga with that tedious senate debate from The Phantom Menace rather than the iconic Star Destroyer crawl. We can whinge until we're blue in the ankles about cutscenes versus in-game storytelling, but if the likes of me are considering giving up on a game before it has even begun, there's surely a bigger issue here. This is about grabbing the player from the off, and neither *Assassin's Creed* nor *Mass Effect* do that. In the case of *Assassin's Creed*, its developers seem determined to tell a story that I refuse to believe a single player cares about (and don't get me started on the exciting futuristic sequences, where you get to control your character as he walks to his bedroom, gets into bed, goes to sleep, wakes up, gets out of bed...).

I'll let *Mass Effect* off to a degree – it is an RPG, albeit one wearing a pair of split-crotch shoot-'em-up Y fronts – but there's no excuse for *Assassin's Creed*'s seemingly endlessly talky opening 40 minutes. It possibly wouldn't matter if the cutscenes were in some way interesting, or witty, or engagingly framed – but they're not. They're one step removed from talking heads, talking about things that are of no remote interest to anyone other than the person who was paid to write them. And it's a shame, because – once you get there – it's a good game. In fact, it's a far better game than many reviewers seemed to give it credit for (apparently, the free-running controls took the gameplay out of the player's hands... Hello? Was *Pac-Man* rubbish because you didn't get to hand-craft the mazes out of wood?).

Games have to grab you audience by the eyebrows from the very off, otherwise you're sunk – and I'm sure that's the difference between *Mass Effect* and *Assassin's Creed* being awarded so many six out of tens (or lower) instead of sevens or eights.

Even *Call Of Duty 4* starts with a slightly hackneyed training sequence – the one oozing, diseased ass in an otherwise award-winning donkey sanctuary. It may have been a bit rubbish in the end, but *Call Of Duty 3* at least had that training level bleed into the main game, by having it interrupted by a Nazi attack. And while we're on the subject of openings (matron), I was also slightly upset by *Mario Galaxy*'s first five minutes. Overall, there's no doubt that it's one of the most perfect videogames ever made, but the beginning is nowhere near as epic or breathtaking as, say, the opening of *Mario 64*. I found this so distressing that I ate my own dog.

I find it confusing to believe that there are game developers who still haven't understood that the key to gaming is interactivity, and delivering the play experience that players have paid for. Let us now draw a line in the sand, and say: 'No more'. Let us make 2008 the year when redundant cutscenes, dull training levels and endless talky opening bits are consigned to the dustbin of history. In five years, wouldn't it be good to look back on them as archaic and pointless as the term 'interactive movies'? Yes. Yes, it would

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television

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2008

Inbox

Issue 185

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Burnout Paradise

Having played every *Burnout* extensively I can confidently say that this is the best *Burnout*, with one of the best singleplayer modes, and the best online mode ever in an arcade racer.

[illegible]

Can I just add that there's like 120 events. So you don't even have to do the same events over. Just simply select one of a multitude of others.

The singleplayer mode has tons of stuff to do. As for the multiplayer, apart from a few connection issues it's bloody stunning, definitely the best around in my opinion.

[illegible]

Just had my first ranked race. Worked well. Came second. 'Twas a lot like making love to a beautiful woman.

[illegible]

Two minutes of fumbling round corners followed by 'FAILED!'?

[illegible]

The best letter wins a DS Lite

Games are far from a mirror of ourselves, but no other medium can purport to have as many different experiences as it has customers

The brilliant way Valve has interwoven the story interactively in *Half-Life 2* is very frequently used as an example of videogames being able to tell stories without the immersion being broken. Most recently, this was in **Edge**'s Christmas issue and a focal point of an excellent speech by Will Wright. Many big industry names call one way or the other for the death of the cutscene, explaining that interactive storytelling is the way forward.

Ironically enough, it is *Half-Life 2* which gives us the most memorable cutscenes: the G-Man's appearances. The G-Man is the centre point of the entire *Half-Life* universe, its mysterious events, its fighting factions, the very reason both Gordon and Alyx are still alive. He appears to us in two ways: in-game and in cutscenes. His in-game appearances enforce his story presence, but it is in the cutscenes that we get this story told.

Gamers love and embrace the new interactive stories. But videogames are also full of excellent moments which are not in-game. For me, the discussion boils down to one question: is the story any good? The manner in which it is told, I gladly leave up to the experts such as Gabe Newell or Will Wright. But whenever the discussion comes up, just remember that ironic voice: "Oh Mister Freeeman..."

Rogier Van Kralingen

Unlike most, you won't find us blindly writing off cutscenes, even non-interactive ones. We do prefer them snappy, like *Half-Life 2*'s, though

I'm a mentor for teenagers who have fallen out with the education system. I'm also, by my own reckoning, an avid, well-informed gamer. Sometimes, as a treat for my students, I will take them to the Omega Sektor in our city centre where we usually manage a couple of hours of uninterrupted calamity. The best thing about these trips is witnessing the student play the game.

The last time I went my student and I played co-op *GRAW2* on the PCs. There are few things more profound to a young adult than the blaring of gunfire and a slug to the midriff followed by a trip to the respawn screen. They can mull over the meaning of death as they watch the loading bar. Or maybe not. On this occasion we were both attempting a bridge map and were both instantly scythed down when we approached the main valley. My reaction was to scrutinise the angle from which the fire came. Meanwhile my student hit the deck, crawled to cover and scoped things out. He soon found out who shot me as my corpse slumped to the floor a second time.

Games are far from a mirror of ourselves, but there is high art when the player is pushed to react. It's a cliché to say it, but the truth is that no other medium can purport to have as many different experiences as it has customers. What has emerged from the evolution of *Pong* is the articulation of *BioShock*, the intensity of *Call Of Duty 4*, the diversity of *Crysis*. And what has emerged from playing these games is the realisation that, of all media, games have no limit. Books are read, films are watched, but games are us. Perhaps the question is not whether there is art lurking in there but how far we are determined to unearth it. You personify *Darwinia*, you relate to Gordon Freeman, and, if you really want to, you recognise the island in *Warrior Within* as a metaphor for the Prince's mind. My student took the world and put it into *GRAW2*.

He was still lying behind a burnt-out van as I selected the 50-cal sniper rifle and loaded up with smoke grenades. I ran doggedly to the edge of the valley but he screamed: "Get down!" Together we lay in the grass and scoped out the valley and, just where he was pointing, there was a soldier in waiting: a force of the game world that undid me but was conquered by my young partner. It was an enemy I had never seen before.

Ambrus Veres

Yes, perhaps the best thing about playing a game co-operatively is the chance to see new sides of even people you know well. And for that observation, we're sending a DS Lite

While BMI (calculated by dividing your weight by the square of your height) does have its limitations, it

certainly is not 'pop science' that 'has now been largely discredited as a useful gauge of health by the scientific community' (E185). In fact, were a doctor to prescribe you weight-loss medication, it would almost certainly be based on your BMI. The issues society faces with respect to obesity are of such concern that Nintendo should be applauded for encouraging a less sedentary lifestyle and, should playing *Wii Fit* with a Balance Board lead to any (needed) weight loss, BMI is indeed a suitable indicator to track this.
Dunstan Cooke

We'll be sure to pass this on to all of our 'obese' rugby-playing friends

I've just read that you've received only a single letter saying anything at all bad about *Super Mario Galaxy*. What the...? Are you joking? 'Somebody had better do something about that', I thought to myself.

My wife, sensing my extreme pain, asked if there was anything I wanted. Sensing my opportunity, I whispered that I'd really like an Xbox 360

I'm by no means going to argue that the new *Mario* is rubbish. That would firstly be stupid because I would get slated and secondly just plain wrong; it's quite good. It really isn't *that* good, though, is it? When people started raving about it on my local forum, I went out and bought it having not been particularly awaiting its release or anything like that. I played through half the first galaxy and thought: 'OK, this whole pinging around planets thing with the mini-puzzles and platform bits is pretty annoying, but it's probably just the first few levels to ease you in gently'. So I left it at that, saved my game, ready to come back to tomorrow. About seven or eight sessions later and I've finally concluded that: 'Oh my God, this is the entire game. Wait a second, this is the ENTIRE GAME?!' I simply can't get over the feeling of 'going through the motions' that seems to permeate the gameplay. All I've done is jumped on a few heads and spun into a few things to open up the opportunity for more jumping and spinning. But then you might say that's the beauty of it. I suppose my view is the exact opposite of yours and Matt Wood's. I really don't think 'pure simple fun' is enough for me to enjoy a videogame these days. I can play a £3 puzzle game on Steam if all I want is a bit of fun. Admittedly, I have always mainly loved what I call 'story games', but I'm not trying to say that *Galaxy* needs more meaning or context. I do, however, think that a truly great videogame must tick all the boxes of greatness, of which being fun to play is only one. Having a good story or atmosphere, for me, is another. We should not be lured into gaming hedonism.

GRAW2's exacting depiction of combat means that its co-operative mode demands very careful teamwork, a feature that Ambrus Veres has found reveals much about how we relate to each other

Topic: Favourite Videogame Environments/Atmosp

Game worlds to lose yourself in. I'm not talking about stellar level design, more just the feel of the place. *Shadow Of The Colossus* – there's still nothing else quite like it. Desolate, haunting and extremely atmospheric.

***Mass Effect* – more the story that gripped you, but overall it felt like being part of something bigger.**

***San Andreas* was probably the most awe-inspiring environment in a game I've experienced. It was that, more than anything else, which made me such a fan.**

Similar to *Super Metroid*'s oppressive lonesomeness is *System Shock 2* where the only things around you are dead or trying to kill you. Then there are the datalogs and ghosts, which are like echoes of the life that existed shortly before your arrival. Awesome.

***Dead Rising* looked and sounded like a mall. Reminded me of the Metro Centre.**

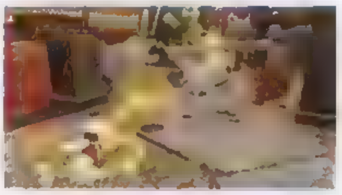
***Jet Set Willy I* and *II* – totally bizarre and fun without end**

***Halo* – The Silent Cartographer just evokes far too many memories for me to not include it in this list.**

***Fable* – Albion is still the best fantasy-style world I've come across in a long time.**

***Majora's Mask*. Not for the graphics, but the population of the world and the music made it the most atmospheric game to date for me.**

***A Link To The Past* when you start the game under a storm, rain pelting down around followed by a trip through the castle sewers, finally emerging from the chapel to find clear blue skies, lush green fields and that theme kicking in.**



The 'pure simple fun' of *Super Mario Galaxy* just isn't enough for Ben Brown, who warns against us being 'lured into gaming hedonism'

The obviously worrying personal implication of this is that I may not be able to classify myself as a 'gamer' any more. I was roundly hushed on the forum and I wouldn't be at all surprised by a similar reaction from **Edge**. Will I ever love a game ever again?
Ben Brown

OK, we're probably just about done with *Mario Galaxy* feedback now. It must be miserable to find so little gratification in fun. Also: hush.

The letter from Ian Carlson in January's Inbox was indeed a noble act in order to get more gaming time, but I think I can go one slightly more painful step forward. Just over 18 months ago after the birth of our fourth child, to stop the inevitable happening and the creation of a fifth I also agreed to the only noble gesture available to me and opted for the snip. As you can imagine, four kids is a financial challenge, and my days of treating myself to PC upgrades, consoles and music had become extremely distant. The day came around quickly and I found myself on the operating couch at my doctor's (it's only a local anaesthetic, you know) and, well, let's cut over the next part... Now those people that tell you it's nothing are liars – it hurts like hell. My wife, sensing my extreme pain, asked if there was anything she could do, if there was anything I wanted. I remember this next bit well. Sensing my opportunity, I whispered that I'd really like an Xbox 360. The words hit home and although it was out of our budget she agreed. I knew the opportunity had to be taken

there and then, so I suggested we go straight to the local Toys R Us and pick one up. Walking round the store was excruciating and I vaguely remember the guy handing the box to me after we'd paid, but I was by that time sweating profusely and nearly passing out. We got home and I had my new toy. Victory was mine. I was ecstatic but yet nauseous, and I decided the best thing was to actually pass out. To this day my wife still tells everyone that she can't believe I talked her into it, but for me the pain was worth it.
Mark Wilson

If nothing else, all this talk is making us wonder how **Edge** readers have time to actually play games, what with the amount of making babies going on

While reading issue 184 I was struck by what appeared to have been the hijack of the magazine I once loved by a war-loving buffoon. The review of *Blacksite* dedicated over half its space to a dissection of its really quite brave and interesting storyline because the reviewer obviously did not share the sentiments of the developers. One cannot paint it as presenting a 'bland conspiracy theory' when it is done in such a break from the normal videogame route, and aspects of it are true to all but the most blinded. Numerous books and films use monsters, as it were, to portray the monstrous policies of the US government. For example, both Pynchon's Against The Day and the film Host have symbolic monsters that act in a similar manner.

In the following review [*Battalion Wars 2*], it seems a teenage Soldier Of Fortune reader has been handed the reins as they attack the game for portraying Nazi Germany in a bad light. This is both preposterous and dangerous. It would be interesting to hear in what 'good light' **Edge** would have preferred Kuju to have presented the Nazis in. Videogames are right to start looking more at the political state of the world we live in. Perhaps it is a step towards the medium being accepted as art and as a relevant medium in which to get across a range of worldviews. **Edge** should strive not to be influenced in their writing by the political sentiments of their reviewers.
Russell Bennetts

With *BW2*, our point wasn't that Nazis should be portrayed positively, but that Germans shouldn't automatically be associated with Nazis. Is that all right with everyone? Yes? OK, now we're done with politics in games, too

Topic: You were wrong

The thread for swallowing your pride and admitting you just didn't know what you were talking about. For starters, I repeatedly defended *Guitar Hero 3*. I was wrong. It is OK, but *GH2* was better.
[illegible]

I claimed *Psychonauts* was awful and overrated after playing it for a few hours on PS2. After downloading it on Live, I can admit I was wrong.
[illegible]

I said *Mario Party 8* would be good based upon *Mario Party 4* providing many nights of enjoyment and the Wii controls being well suited. I was very, very wrong.
[illegible]

I bought *Clive Barker's Jericho*. I was mostly wrong.
[illegible]

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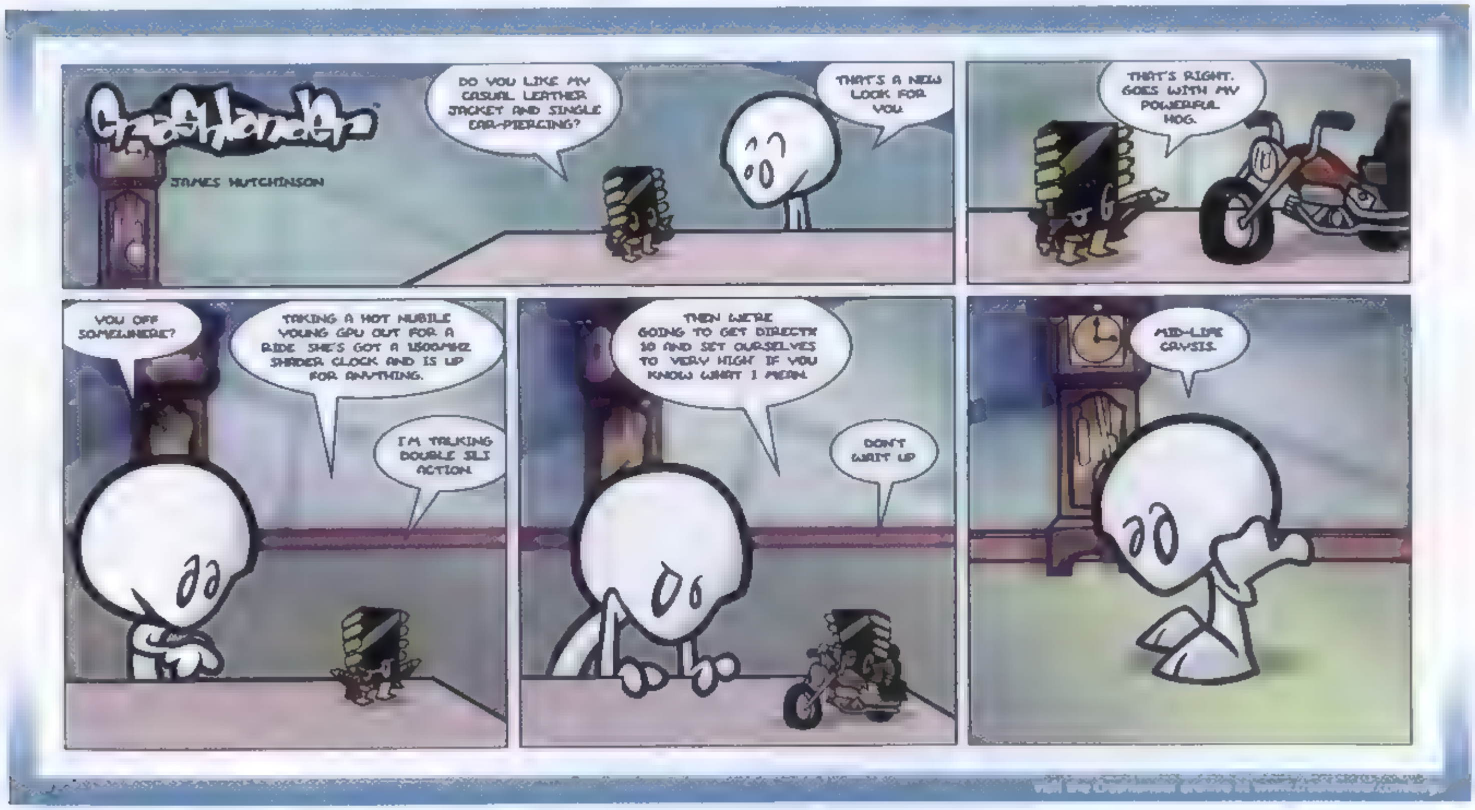
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DO YOU LIKE MY CASUAL LEATHER JACKET AND SINGLE EAR-PIERCING?
THAT'S A NEW LOOK FOR YOU.
THAT'S RIGHT. GOES WITH MY POWERFUL HOG.
YOU OFF SOMEWHERE?
TAKING A HOT NUBILE YOUNG GPU OUT FOR A RIDE. SHE'S GOT A 1500MHZ SHADER CLOCK AND IS UP FOR ANYTHING.
I'M TALKING DOUBLE SLI ACTION.
THEN WE'RE GOING TO GET DIRECTX 10 AND SET OURSELVES TO VERY HIGH IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.
DON'T WAIT UP.
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